

Mine, Always

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Mine, Always

by [bluecurls](#)

Summary

He was nearly 20 years older than her. Her teacher. Her friend. Hers. She was too young. Too innocent. A student. His.

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Chapter 1

"I trusted you," she shouted, her nostrils flaring, her face flushed. She was angry when she should have been scared, hurt when she should have been terrified. He'd known she was his; he knew the minute she boarded the train, her scent calling to him before she even entered his car; but as he stared at the bushy-haired witch glaring at him, her hazel eyes flashing, he felt something that went beyond recognition.

Pride.

For a second, he forgot he was 32-year-old werewolf and his intended, his mate, was a 13-year-old schoolgirl. He forgot he was her teacher, her confidant. He forgot his job was to protect her, to make sure she stayed safe until she was of age and old enough to accept, to understand, all he required of her, all he wanted from her. All he could do was gape at the small girl and, for a moment, feel peace. There was so much wrong with the situation, so many obstacles they'd have to overcome, but she was for him.

That's all that mattered.

"Are you crazy?!"

"No crazier than you, I suppose."

"She's only a girl, a child! She's Harry's best friend, Remus. You can't claim his best friend as your mate!"

*Remus jumped to his feet, anger and frustration taking over. He pushed Sirius against the wall, his forearm pressed against his friend's neck. "Do you honestly think I asked for this? That I saw her and **chose** her as mine? I can't control this, Sirius. That's not how it works!" Shoving away, he paced the dark study, his movements stiff as he tried to calm the wolf inside.*

"Moony ..."

He shook his head angrily. Nothing Sirius said right now would help. He wasn't stupid. He knew the situation was wrong. She was a girl; an extremely bright and mature girl, but a girl nonetheless.

Sighing, he sat in an armchair, his forearms resting on his legs. He was exhausted. "I don't want her, not in the physical sense."

Sirius sat, too, sprawling on the worn leather couch in casual stance that said more about trust than words ever could. He wasn't scared of Remus, of Moony. He knew he had control,

that while he would get angry, get frustrated, he wouldn't hurt him. "I don't understand. You tell me she's your mate, but you don't want her?"

"Not now. She's too young. The feelings I have for her now, it's not love. Well, it is, but it isn't. It's ..." He struggled to put into words what he felt. It was basic. Instinct. How did one explain something that was as natural to him as breathing? "They're protective," he finally said. "She is the most important thing to me, Sirius. It's my job to make sure she's safe."

He sighed. "You barely know her, Remus."

"That doesn't matter. She's mine."

"Professor Lupin!" she shouted, her smile lighting up her face as she rushed forward. She ignored his outstretched hand and hugged him, her small arms tight around his waist. He returned the gesture, though not as enthusiastically, his eyes catching Sirius' over her head.

"Hermione." He stepped back carefully when she released him. "How are you? How was your summer?"

*Her smile faded a little. Remus felt the wolf inside shift, alert to the change of mood. He forced himself to stay relaxed and appear calm. "It was hard being away from everyone, from Harry. My parents took me to France for a few weeks, but they ... they don't get it. I need to be **here**."*

He nodded, understanding and fearful at the same time. She was brave, loyal; qualities he desired in the woman he'd spend the rest of his life with, but also feared. Harry was her first priority. She was his. How was he going to keep her safe?

"Where's Prof – where's Remus?" Hermione asked Sirius, looking pointedly at the empty seat at the table. It was Christmas Eve and Grimmauld Place was filled with people. Harry was there, of course, and the entire Weasley clan. Everyone was thrilled Mr. Weasley was safe after an attack at the Ministry. Hermione had planned to go home for the holidays, but Dumbledore had contacted her parents, saying recent events made travel unsafe. She missed her parents, but the thought of spending Christmas with Prof – no, Remus – made her feel ... well, she couldn't explain it.

"He's on a mission," Sirius replied.

Was it her imagination or was he looking at her differently? Was he staring? Why? She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, wishing the raven-haired wizard would focus his attention elsewhere. She liked Sirius. She's always liked Sirius, but she wasn't entirely comfortable in his presence. She sometimes felt like he was studying her, looking for something, she didn't know what, that he could use against her.

Forcing herself to nod, she ignored the quick stab of pain at the news. Remus had a mission. He was in the Order, after all – and a werewolf. If he could convince packs to join them, their numbers could help the cause. The fact that she was worried didn't mean anything. It was a dangerous time. She worried about everyone.

"Please give him my best when he returns," she said.

"Hermione!"

He was frantic, his wand casting hexes, deflecting others, as he searched for her. He knew he had to help the others, to protect Harry, but he couldn't focus, not until he knew she was all right. Where was she?

"Remus?"

He didn't hear her voice, not out loud, but inside him. He caught her scent in the chaos. She was afraid. She was hurt!

"Hermione!"

He leapt to the right, avoiding a blast of green light, his eyes on the Death Eater who had his mate cornered, her small frame pressed against the wall as she stared at Antonin Dolohov before a flash of purple light hit her small frame.

"Petrificus Totalus!" he shouted, hitting Dolohov, rushing to Hermione as she fell.

"She's going to be fine, Moony," Sirius said, his eyes wary as he studied his friend. He looked exhausted. His eyes were bloodshot, his face drawn, as he studied the pale girl in the bed. He held one of her hands in both of his. He kept one finger on her wrist, the steady beat of her pulse the only thing keeping him from completely losing it.

"I was almost too late," he whispered, his voice breaking at the thought of what could have happened. As long as he lives, he'll never forget the fear that gripped him when he was contacted.

A break-in at the Ministry. Harry. His friends. Death eaters.

Hermione.

"But you weren't."

"Sirius –"

"Remus. You have to stop. You want to protect her? You want to survive this fight so you can claim her as your own?"

"Yes," he said softly, his gaze never leaving her face.

"Then you have to let go. Let go of the guilt. Let go of the fear. Let go of her. Trust that if the fates have decided she's yours, then both of you will survive to make that happen. But you can't fight and protect her at the same time."

Remus looked at his best friend, the other person he cared for most in the world. He almost lost him tonight. If Sirius hadn't turned at the right moment, Bellatrix's killing curse would have taken him.

He smirked.

"What?"

"Sometimes I wonder if you should have been a cat instead of a dog."

Sirius cocked a brow.

"Nine lives, Padfoot. If anyone has them, it's you."

Sirius grinned, some of the tension lifting from their corner of Hogwarts' infirmary. "A few less now, I wager. But I promise you, I will use as many as needed to keep Hermione safe."

"Look out!"

Hermione ducked behind the stone wall, avoiding a streak of red. Taking a deep breath, she jumped out again, her eye on the Death Eater focused on Ginny. She blocked the curse sent her way, casted a hex of her own, unaware that she was moving into a circle, her body drawn to another until she felt him against her back.

"It's me!" Remus shouted, not turning to look at the witch he knew was behind him. "Where's Harry?"

"I don't know," she cried. "I think he ran after Professor Snape!"

Remus nodded, filing away the anger at Snape's treachery for another time. "Hermione, you have to go!"

"No!"

"Don't argue! Get Ginny and the others and leave!"

"No!" she shouted, her frustration at his words empowering her to fight harder.

"You should have left," he told her. His voice was hard, but his touch was light as he murmured the healing spell, her injuries from the battle healing faster than they appeared. She stared at him; her eyes focused the sandy brown hair that fell over his face as he concentrated on his task. She wanted to push the hair back, to see his eyes, a warm green that turned amber the closer he was to the full moon. Her hand was halfway up to do so when she let it drop to her side. What was she doing? Professor Dumbledore was dead. Snape had killed him! The entire school, the Order – everyone was in mourning. Remus had screamed when he heard the news, a tortured sound she felt in her bones. She wanted to run to him, to wrap her arms around him and take away his pain.

Why was she so drawn to this man? She thought her crush would dissipate with time. Of course she was attracted to his mind, his knowledge. He remained the best Defense Against the Dark Arts professor she ever had, but sometimes she'd look at him and feel ... she couldn't put it into words, but she practically craved it, whatever it was.

"I couldn't leave," she murmured.

"Why?"

"Harry needed me."

She missed the flash of anger in his eyes.

He watched her drink the potion, her movements calm, sure, as she swallowed. Moments later, Hermione was gone and another Harry appeared. He inhaled slowly, wishing there was another way they could move the real Harry to the Burrow. She was of age now. She cared for him, he knew that. He could hear how her heart beat faster when he was near, how her senses went on alert when he walked into the room. He felt the same way.

He had for years.

"Remus. You all right there, mate?"

He looked at Harry – no, George. "Right as rain."

"She's a vision, Remus."

He didn't answer, though his eyes never strayed from the witch in red as she wound her way through the crowd, her arm linked with Ron's. They came to the dance floor. The redhead said something and she laughed, pulling him forward, a mischievous look on her face. He swallowed the quick bite of jealousy that bubbled when the young wizard took her hand, placed another on her hip.

"Down, Moony," Sirius murmured, taking a sip of his firewhiskey, the one glass he allowed himself to celebrate Bill and Fleur's wedding.

Remus was sober. He volunteered to stand watch all evening, his few minutes inside the tent the first and only break he planned to take. Watching Hermione was torture. The dress hugged her curves; the swish of the skirt drew attention to her strong calves. She had tamed her hair into a low knot, exposing her neck. The wolf stirred inside him, snapping. He was tired of waiting. He wanted to take.

To bite.

To claim.

"Have you heard from them?"

Sirius looked up at Remus. The man had been pacing the study for more than an hour. It was the night before the full moon, a time when he was already on edge. Not having seen or heard from Harry – and Hermione – in months was not what he needed right now.

"If I had, you'd be the first to know."

Remus nodded. He couldn't stand this. He knew she had a mission. Harry had a mission and she had to help, but not knowing where she was, what she was doing – it was torture. His head ached. His body ached. His heart ached – for her. Everything was for her.

"It'll end soon, Remus."

He looked over. "The war?"

Sirius nodded. "That, too."

Chapter 2

"Remus?"

He groaned, the pounding in his head beating in time with the fist on his bedroom door. He stuffed his face deeper into his pillow and muttered a fervent prayer to whoever listened to such things that the knocking would cease. A pause made him grin. Peace. Finally.

Then it started again.

"Remus!"

It wasn't going to stop. He wasn't going to go away. Sirius Black has been called many things in his lifetime, but patient was never one of them. Pushing himself up on his forearms, Remus grabbed his wand off the nightstand and undid the lock before he collapsed on the bed again. He felt like hell. The full moon was still two nights away, but the wolf wanted *out*. He was tired of waiting.

"How ya doing, Remus?"

"I *was trying to sleep*, which doesn't happen often this time of the cycle, as you know, Sirius."

The Animagus shrugged and, ignoring his friend's poor mood, crossed the room, hopped on to the empty side of the bed, and leaned against the headboard, crossing his feet at the ankles.

Remus opened one eye. "I've told you a million times, Padfoot; you're cute, but you're not my type."

He chuckled. "Oh, I know that, Moony. I'm the one who's had to listen to you, pardon the pun, *moon* over a certain witch for five years now."

Remus groaned again, the mere mention of Hermione causing such a feeling of longing deep inside that he tried not to think about her.

Three months had passed since the end of the war. When Harry had killed Lord Voldemort, Remus foolishly, naively, believed it was his time, their time. She had hugged him the Great Hall, a hug that was full of relief that it was over, that they were all right, but also one filled with sadness for all who had fallen. He had known, as he stood there with his arms around her, his chin resting on top of her head as they leaned into each other, the pounding in his heart slowing as he breathed in the rightness that was her, that it wasn't the time to declare his intentions.

It didn't happen over the next month, either. The dead had to be buried; their ultimate sacrifice honored. He saw her at the ceremonies, a pale figure in muted grays, one third of the so-called Golden Trio. He watched as she gripped Ron's hand, her arm around Harry. He understood, even as the wolf roared in protest, that she didn't need him now. She needed her friends. She needed time. She needed to heal. So he hunted, joining the aurors rounding up

rogue Death Eaters. He spent weeks away from Grimmauld Place, returning only when he knew Hermione wouldn't be there.

"You look like hell." Sirius remarked one late June evening, eyeing Remus as he dragged himself into the kitchen, a fresh collection of injuries on his scarred body.

"I don't feel much better." He accepted the glass of firewhiskey with a grateful smile.

*"You can't keep going like this, Remus. **Moony** can't keep going like this."*

*He sipped. The burn of the alcohol eased the ache of his throat. He knew Sirius was right. His transformations were getting worse. The moment Hermione turned 17, it was like a switch inside him had flipped. He still wanted to protect her – she was his mate, he would **always** protect her – but now he physically craved her. His blood burned with lust for the young witch. It took every bit of strength he had not to act on his instincts, to ignore his desire to claim her, to bury inside her until he was imprinted on her soul the way she was on his. It scared him how much the image of her on her hands and knees as he mounted her, his body pumping into hers, had thrilled him; still thrilled him.*

"She's not ready."

"She's almost 19," Sirius shot back.

Remus pushed away from the table and left the kitchen.

It had been a relief when Hermione announced she was going to Australia. She had traced her parents' to Melbourne, thanks to a nosy neighbor who didn't recognize Hermione, a side effect of the memory charm, but who loved to gossip and was perfectly willing to share what she knew about the Grangers. He'd said good bye with the others, his body tense with the effort it took to wish her good luck rather than pull her into his arms. He had locked himself in his bedroom for three days, sleeping off months of anxiety. Sirius forced him out of bed the fourth day, dragging him downstairs for food and outside for fresh air.

That was six weeks ago. Aside from the full moon every cycle and, lately, the days leading up to it, Remus felt nearly human again, or as human as a werewolf can claim to be.

"I heard from Harry," Sirius said.

"Hmm?"

"They're coming home."

Remus sat up. "They?"

"Harry. Ron. Hermione."

He sucked in his breath. The wolf's ears perked up. She was coming home. "Did they ...?"

Sirius shook his head. Harry's note had been brief, nearly curt, informing him that they were unsuccessful and the date of their arrival. Remus sighed. He knew how powerful the obliivate

charm could be. Very few wizards have been able to come back from it. The idea that Muggles could survive such magic was greater than wishful thinking, but that was his Hermione. She had to try.

"How long do I have?"

"A day. They'll be here tomorrow."

He nodded.

"You can't leave, Remus," Sirius told him.

"I wasn't -"

"Don't lie to me," he said forcefully, gray eyes flashing. "You've used every excuse out there to avoid the inevitable. Hermione Granger is your mate and when she gets home, you are going to stake your claim."

"I hardly think it's your responsibility to tell me who to fuck," Remus said coolly.

"Screw you, Remus, this isn't about fucking, it's about survival," he growled. "Not being with her is killing you! The transformations are worse because you know, Moony knows, that it's time to take her, but your stupid brain won't accept what was decided years ago – and maybe even long before that. Why the hell are you so against it now when the idea of her was acceptable five years ago?"

"Because it was five years ago!" Remus pushed himself out of bed and paced his room, his bare feet slapping angrily, bare feet slapping against the hardwood floor. "It was impossible! She was a child; an annoying little know-it-all!"

"She's still an annoying little know-it-all, but she's also a full-grown woman. It's what you wanted."

"It's not what **she** wanted!" Remus plopped back down on the bed, his outburst making the pain in his head increase tenfold. Massaging the bridge of his nose, he forced himself to take deep breaths, to try to alleviate some of the pressure. "I've had time to get used to the idea, Sirius. I recognized her immediately, knew she was mine, but it took longer to accept it. She ... she's not like me. She won't understand the finality of the situation."

"I think you are underestimating our favorite little bookworm."

"You know as well as I do the odds of a werewolf finding his mate are nearly impossible," Remus replied. "This is ancient magic, so old there's very little recorded information, more just stories passed from generation to generation."

"So tell her the stories. Explain it to her. Tell her everything you know."

"But I don't know everything! I've tried to learn as much as I can about mates, but the information isn't there."

Sirius got off the bed. It was getting late and he was tired of the conversation. "So wing it. You want her; you know she cares about you. It'll be fine."

"Oh, the great Sirius Black says it will be fine?" Remus' voice was thick with sarcasm. "Well then, it must be true."

Sirius gave him the finger, but didn't slam the door. He knew his friend was hurting. He could see it in the way he carried himself. He'd put on some weight, in a good way, and his face wasn't so gaunt looking, but he still walked like an old man, like every step was painful. Moony wanted to play. Remus was fighting him as hard as he could, but the wolf was stronger. He was going to take over and Merlin help Remus – and Hermione – when it happened.

She stood outside the front door, her hand poised to knock, before she thought better of it. This was her home now. She should treat it as such and walk inside as any of the other residents would do. She shoved away the memory of her parents' house. It was gone. Her parents were gone. She was alone. The sooner she came to terms with that, the sooner she could focus on the rest of her life.

"Hello?" she called, pushing the front door open. She left her shoes near the entryway and made her way down the cramped, dark hall, her nose crinkling at the musty scent that greeted her. Apparently older men were just as opposed to housework as their younger counterparts.

"Hermione!" Sirius came bounding down the stairs, sweeping the young witch in his arms and twirling her around. "Welcome home, my girl!"

She giggled and held on tight, grateful for his enthusiastic greeting as it overshadowed her moment of grief.

"Where's Harry?" Sirius looked over Hermione's shoulder for his godson.

"Still at the Burrow with Ginny." She avoided his eyes. "It's, um, been a while since their last visit."

Sirius chuckled but, noticing the tinge of pink on the tips of Hermione's ears, swallowed the comment he wanted to make. "Well, come on," he said, his hand on her lower back pushing her toward the staircase. "Take your things to your room and get settled while I put on the stew for dinner."

She stopped on the first step, turning to stare at the wizard with round eyes. "Stew? Don't tell me you learned to cook while I was gone?"

He laughed, his gray eyes lighting up with their familiar mischievous light. "Please. Molly Weasley, in all her well-meaning bossiness, brought it over this morning, trying to convince me, yet again, that a girl of 18 had no business living with two adult men."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm sure she said nothing about Harry."

"Of course not. We've already ruined that young man with our bachelor lifestyle and deviant ways." Wiggling his eyebrows suggestively, he leered at Hermione. "Why do you think we want you?"

Laughing, she continued up the staircase, pleased to see that her room – second door on the right – had been cleaned and aired for her arrival with fresh linens on the bed, new towels in her bathroom and a single-stemmed rose in the bud base on the nightstand. Smiling at the sweet gesture, she took her suitcase out of her pocket, used her wand to enlarge it to its normal size, and began to unpack.

He could hear her humming, her voice sweetly off-key as she moved about her room, likely putting away clothes and other personal items in the space she claimed as hers three years ago. The fact that it was directly below his bedroom was a coincidence. That's what he told himself then, that's what he told himself now, ignoring the wave of peace that settled over him the minute she entered Grimmauld Place.

Stretching, his latest attempt at napping as big a failure as the others, he got up, flicked his wand to straighten his bed and walked to his adjoining bathroom. He removed his clothes, letting them drop to the floor, and stepped into the large shower, grateful for his friend's generosity and little-known addiction to home improvement projects. The multi-head shower had revived Remus' tired, beaten body more times than he could count. Standing in the glass, enclosed stall, the hot water pounding on his long, lean frame as the room fills with steam, he concentrated on relaxing, shaking away images of Hermione in the shower with him, her wet curls clinging to her face as he lifted her, her legs wrapping around him, ankles locked at his back, her nails digging into his shoulders as he –

"Fuck." He wandlessly and silently turned the water temperature to cold.

She was in the kitchen by the time he felt human enough to join them. He could smell her when he opened his bedroom door, a combination of lemon, ink and parchment that was distinctly Hermione. Her scent was addictive. It comforted him. It aroused him. Breathing in the familiarity, he shuffled down the staircase, following the sound of muffled voices – one low, the other high.

"Remus! So you decided to join us, huh?" Sirius called from his seat at the kitchen table, an expectant smile on his face. He had been waiting for this moment, to be a witness to like recognizing like.

"Remus?" Hermione turned from the stove, where she had rescued the stew from Sirius' attempts at reheating it, her last-minute intervention saving them all from a less-than-edible

meal. Smiling, she turned down the heat and walked toward him, wrapping her arms around his waist in a friendly hug.

He returned the gesture, fisting his hands to stop himself from gripping her shoulders and pulling her closer. Ignoring Sirius' raised eyebrow, he stepped away, his body already missing the feel of her.

"I missed you," she told him.

He swallowed. The wolf purred. "I missed you, too."

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I forgot how much I loved these two together!

She was crying.

He put down the book he'd been trying to read for the past hour and focused on the sound. It was muffled, which meant she had put up silencing charms after going to her room, but they weren't strong enough to keep him from hearing – not this close to the full moon. He was out of bed and halfway down the stairs before he stopped himself. He couldn't go knocking on her door at three in the morning. She'd want to know why and he'd have to tell the truth. He couldn't lie, not to her. Sighing, he sat on the step, his back against the wall, legs stretched as far as they could go, in a silent vigil. After an hour, he heard her give one last snuffle. Ignoring the creak in his knees, he stood and walked to the kitchen to prepare the tea he knew she'd want.

Hermione splashed cold water on her face, trying to make her eyes less puffy before going to the kitchen for tea. She knew she could erase all traces of her tears with a spell, but that seemed disrespectful to her parents. Instead, she did things the Muggle way, hoping it was enough to fool the men of the house if she happened to see any of them. This late at night, or this early in the morning, it was doubtful anyone was awake, but Sirius kept odd hours, Harry was wound up when he got back from the Burrow and then there was Remus.

She sighed. Remus. He wasn't sleeping. He pretended everything was fine, that he was fine, but she saw the tension in his body, the exhaustion that sadly seemed to be so much a part of him. They had sat around the table after dinner, the Marauders telling stories to make Harry laugh and take the spotlight off her unsuccessful search for her parents, and the whole time all she wanted to do was go up to him and knead some of the stiffness from his body. She never wanted to take care of a person as much as she wanted to take care of Remus Lupin – not even Harry and Ron, and Lord knows how much those two needed her. She ignored her instincts, though, knowing how much her actions, no matter their intention, would affect him. He couldn't stand pity and his trust in people, especially women, was minimal. She'd hate to put any strain on their friendship, though now that she was back, she'd look into brewing a potion that could help with the after effects of the full moon.

Her mind in research mode, which is where she was most comfortable, she walked to the kitchen, bumping into the very person she wanted to help.

"Remus!"

His hands shot out, gripping her elbows to steady her. "Sorry, Hermione; I wasn't expecting company."

"Me, either," she replied, her eyes drinking in the image of Remus Lupin in draw-string pajama bottoms and ancient gray T-shirt. His feet were bare, a detail she found charming. Despite having lived at Sirius' house on and off for nearly three years, she never saw Remus dressed in anything less than trousers, shirt and socks.

She was so focused on her perusal; she missed how intently he studied her, his eyes roaming over her checkered pajama shorts, fluffy purple socks, and Quidditch World Cup T-shirt. Her hair was pulled in a loose ponytail, her eyes still puffy from her tears. Her face was fatigued and he fought the urge to sweep her into his arms and take her to his bed so he could hold her, just hold her, as she slept.

Sighing, he let go and gestured for her to have a seat and then took a second cup from the cupboard. She watched as he added one lump of sugar and a bit of milk to the tea; exactly how she liked it. Six years of school with Harry and Ron and they still gave her tea the way *they* liked it – brewed extra strong with way too much sugar.

"Thank you." She took the cup in both hands, blowing carefully on the hot liquid.

Remus suppressed a groan at the site of her pursed lips, her pink tongue testing the heat of the tea before taking a sip. "Can't sleep?" He flinched at the sound of his raspy voice.

She shook her head, the movement jostling a few curls from her hair tie. "Too much traveling," she murmured, not meeting his eyes.

Lie.

Remus ignored the irritated growl of the wolf, pushing it aside as he leaned forward to give Hermione the only comfort he could. He placed his hand over hers. She jolted at the touch, but didn't move away. "Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak knits up the o-erwrought heart and bids it break."

Her lips turned up slightly, but her eyes stayed downcast. "Shakespeare, professor?"

"You can grieve, Hermione. I know they aren't gone, but they are gone for you and that's a loss that needs to be acknowledged and mourned."

That's exactly what it felt like. Her practical side knew her parents were alive and well, *safe*, living a child-free existence somewhere in the world, but her emotional side couldn't deal with the fact that she'd never see them again; that she'd never feel her mother's hugs or hear her dad call her "Pumpkin."

She turned her hand over to clasp his. "What if I made the wrong decision?"

"What? Saving their lives? Hermione, you had the biggest target on your back because you are a Muggle-born witch. If the death eaters had gotten to your family before your spell ..."

he stopped, threading his fingers through hers. "Doing the right thing is rarely easy, Hermione. I, for one, am in awe of your bravery."

She looked up then, tears in her eyes. For once, he embraced his instincts. Never letting go of her hand, he circled the table and pulled her into his arms, holding her as she cried.

The wolf was quiet.

"What's your favorite memory about your mom?" Hermione asked. They were in the study, both of them on the couch. They had started on separate ends, but as night turned into day, they moved closer, until Remus was lying down with Hermione snuggled at his side. She fit perfectly, her body molded to his as if she was made for him, which she was. He had one arm wrapped around her waist and the other folded under his head, barely believing the greatness of the moment.

He smiled at the question. "Well, she was a Muggle, like yours. She had a wicked sense of humor."

"Like yours?" Her voice was heavy as exhaustion set in.

"More like Sirius'," he replied, smiling at her snort of laughter. "I think there were times my dad was glad she wasn't a witch, given all the trouble she caused without the aid of magic. She took pride in the messages that came from Hogwarts whenever James, Sirius and I were caught for some misdeed or other."

He could feel her smile as she moved slightly to a more comfortable position, resting her head on his chest, the fingers of one hand absently tracing circles on the soft cotton covering his flat stomach. "How old were you when she died?" she asked.

"Early 20s."

"Do you miss her?"

"Every day."

"Does it get easier?" she whispered.

He knew what she wanted him to say: Yes. Yes, it gets easier. Yes, you will be happy again. Yes, there will come a day when you can think of your loved ones with smiles, not tears. But he couldn't lie.

"It doesn't get easier, but it gets better," he replied carefully. "Grief is a process. No two people grieve the same and there is no right way to do it, not even for you. Feel what you feel, Hermione. That's the only way you can heal."

She nodded sleepily, circling her arm around his waist as sleep overtook her. "Thank you, Remus."

"You're welcome, Hermione."

Sirius found them three hours later, their bodies nestled together, legs tangled. He was more shocked to see Remus sleeping than who he was sleeping with, but there he was, his body lax, eyes closed, breaths in tune with the young witch he held in his arms. Smiling, Sirius shut the door, enacting a silencing charm to give the occupants quiet, at least for a bit longer. He had hoped he could sweet talk Hermione into making breakfast – she knew he loved it when she put chocolate chips in the pancake batter – but it looked like that was going to have to wait another day.

She woke slowly, feeling as if she'd slept for days instead of a few hours. She could barely move, like something had her tied down, but instead of feeling trapped, she felt safe. Protected. Warm. She stretched and arched her neck, the top of her head hid something hard.

"Ow."

"Oh!" She lifted her head cautiously to see a pair of green eyes with amber flecks watching her in amusement. "Remus, I'm sorry, I ..." She moved to get off of him, but the arms that had kept her in place for the past few hours tightened, his fingers brushing against the bare skin exposed between her shorts and shirt. She shivered at his touch.

Don't let her go.

"Please don't," he whispered, his breath warm on her skin, man and wolf's urges in tune with each other. "I haven't slept this well in ... I don't know how long. Will you be so kind to stay and let an old werewolf rest a bit longer?"

"You're not old, Remus," she replied, but she lay back down, not wanting to get up either. She couldn't remember the last time she woke up feeling so restful. The months leading up to the last battle had been filled with fear, she, Harry and Ron grabbing only snatches of sleep during their search of the Horcruxes while the nights after were a combination of sorrow and terror.

He snorted. "I thought you were the smart one, Hermione."

"I am," she replied. "Sirius is several months older than you. If I agree that you're old, that means he's older and I do not want to live with an angry Sirius Black."

He chuckled, his delight in her response inciting him to kiss the top of her head without thinking. "You're right."

"Imagine how great this world would be if everyone would remember that," she told him, ducking her head so he couldn't see the blush flooding her cheeks, but he felt it and closed his

eyes with a satisfied smile.

The day passed quickly. Harry and Hermione flooed to the Burrow for lunch; an attempt to make up for their lack of a proper conversation the day before. Ginny and Ron were there, and the twins, too, which Hermione was grateful for as their presence kept the conversation light.

"Hermione, what are your plans now that you're home?" Molly Weasley asked, her gaze trained on the girl she considered a daughter.

"I'm not sure," Hermione replied. "I considered going back for Hogwarts to finish my seventh year -"

"Yay!" Ginny cried.

" – but now that Harry and Ron are going to begin training as aurors, I wonder what I'll be going back for."

"Take it from us, pet; the life of a dropout is amazing," George grinned, his brother nodding enthusiastically in agreement.

Molly rolled her eyes. She was proud of her sons' success, just as she was proud of all her children, but that didn't mean their decision to leave Hogwarts was right for everyone, especially Hermione.

"It wouldn't necessarily be 'dropping out,'" Hermione said. "Professor McGonagall already said I've met the requirements for graduation, as have Harry and Ron."

"Best news ever," Ron said, stuffing another bite of pie in his mouth.

"Well, dear, it's not like you have to make up your mind today," Molly said. "There's a few weeks still until the term begins and even then, I'm sure accommodations could be made to suit your needs."

Hermione nodded, almost wishing Molly would have pushed the subject and forced her to make a decision. She also received a letter from the Ministry of Magic, informing her that she could begin training as an auror, too, but she declined. She was proud of her efforts during the war, but she was tired of fighting, but she couldn't imagine returning to Hogwarts without Harry and Ron.

What other options did she have?

Chapter 4

It was nearly 5 when Hermione returned home, giggling over something Fred had shouted to her as she was leaving the Burrow.

"Happy?"

She jumped, her surprise causing a few of the packages she cradled in her arms to fall to the floor.

"Sorry, love," Sirius said, leaping up from his seat to take the remaining parcels from her arms.

"Its fine," she told him, bending down to collect what she dropped. "I think Mrs. Weasley learned a long time ago not to send anything breakable when Harry and I travel by floo powder."

"Eight years in the wizarding world and the two of you still stumble more often than not," Sirius chuckled.

"Hey!"

"All in good fun." He set the items on the table, poking a few of them with mild curiosity. "What did she send this time?"

"Chicken pot pie. Bread. Cookies. Oh, and several pounds of meat for Remus. She said he'll be ravenous tomorrow and wasn't sure if we had enough on hand."

Sirius nodded. "If there's a bright side to Bill's werewolf attack, it's that people like Molly Weasley have a better understanding of what Remus goes through every month."

Hermione murmured her agreement. She had seen how much the monthly transformations drain Remus. Usually calm and easy-going, he was edgy the days leading up to a full moon, his mood erratic as his mind and body prepared for the transformation. Comments or actions that he would usually only make him raise an eyebrow, if he acknowledged them at all, affected him more during this time of the month while the days after left him exhausted and beaten. Sirius was the only one he'd see until he felt strong enough to leave his room. Wolfsbane helped, leaving the man in charge of his mind, but he still had to go through the pain of the physical change.

"Who is making the Wolfsbane Potion now that Professor Snape is ..." She couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence. After years of loathing the potions professor, Hermione still had trouble reconciling the fact that Snape was on Dumbledore's side - and Harry's side - the entire time. She carried guilt regarding her actions toward Snape and was behind Harry 100 percent when he insisted his portrait be reinstalled with the other Headmaster paintings at Hogwarts.

"Slughorn, although he'd like someone to take over eventually. He's not as young as he once was and it's a tricky potion. I'd volunteer, but potions were never my strong suit and this isn't something I'm willing to test my skills with, given the side effects."

"You already do enough, Sirius." Hermione absently patted his shoulder as she unwrapped the food Molly had packed. "Having Padfoot around helps him."

Working together, the two put the food away, or, to be more accurate, Sirius put things in cupboard only to have Hermione come up behind him and move an item to a different location. After a few minutes, he gave up, content to sit and watch the ease in which she moved around the kitchen, happy she felt comfortable in the space. "Does this mean you'll be taking over food preparations?" His voice was hopeful.

She kept her back to him so he couldn't see her roll her eyes. "Is this your way of pretending to ask me when we both know I'll end up doing it because you and Remus and Harry are hopeless in the kitchen?"

"Pretty much."

"I thought so." She took two plates down two plates for dinner. She was still full from lunch - meals at the Weasley house tended to be day-long events - but she knew Sirius and Remus needed to eat before nightfall. Waving her wand, she watched as the chicken pot pie went into the oven to warm and thick slices of brown bread were sliced on the cutting board. Without turning around, she moved the bottle of firewhiskey out of Sirius' reach and slid a glass of water and another of milk in its place.

"Why?" he whined.

"You need to be sharp tonight," Hermione told him as she prepared a tray for Remus. "Remus is on edge, more than I've ever seen. I don't want either of you to get hurt."

"Why would you say that?" Sirius asked, trying to keep the incredulity out of his voice. He knew tonight was going to be tough. The past few cycles had been horrendous, but with Hermione back in the house and Moony ready to pounce, it promised to be a long night.

"Hmm? Oh, just the way he's holding himself. He thinks we can't tell when he's keeping himself in check, but the signs are there." She set a plate of food in front of Sirius. Charming Remus' tray, she levitated it so he floated several inches behind her as she left the kitchen. "Eat; I'll be back."

He nodded, his mouth already full. After he was sure Hermione was on the second floor, he reached for the firewhiskey.

"Sirius Orion Black!" She shouted, making the wizard jump in his seat.

"I'm glad she's not my mate," he muttered, dropping his hand in his lap.

Hermione walked to Remus' room on the third floor, knocking twice. When there was no response, she knocked again, a little louder.

"Go away, Sirius!" Remus shouted.

"It's Hermione."

A second later, the locks clicked and the door swung open. Hermione stepped in, the tray still floating behind her. She glanced around the room which, like hers, featured exposed brick on one wall, but while the rest of her room was painted a creamy white, he opted for hunter green. Mahogany bookshelves took up most of his living space, which also consisted of a large oak desk was in one corner and a comfortable armchair and stool in a deep blue fabric by the window. The door to his bathroom was slightly ajar and a small pile of clothes was in front of the wardrobe. Turning to take the tray, she carried it to the nightstand next to Remus' king-sized bed, where he sat with a book in his lap.

"What are you reading?" she asked as she busied herself with the tray.

"Oh, nothing, just ..." he pushed aside the book of fairy tales, tossing a pillow over the cover. "You didn't have to bring me dinner, Hermione. I would've come downstairs."

She turned then, smiling at him. "I know, but I also know how much you try to rest before the moon rises, so why not use it to your advantage and take a meal in bed?"

He returned her smile with one of his own. "Is this your way of saying you expect meals in bed the next time you're ill?"

"You would be the one to pick up on the subtlety of that statement. Now, eat before it gets cold."

He picked up the fork, expecting her to leave, but instead she wandered around his bedroom. He watched as she took in his collection of books, turning away when she kneeled to read the titles on the lower shelves, the image of her nearly on her hands and knees too much for him and Moony. "Feel free to borrow what you want," he told her, ignoring the constant chant of the wolf in his head.

My mate. My woman. Mine.

"I'll take you up on that." She walked to the fireplace to look at the small collection of photographs he had on the mantle. There was one of his parents, another of the Order taken before the first war, a picture of Dumbledore's Army – Hermione shook her head at the state of her hair – and one more of her and Remus sitting in Sirius' study, their heads close together as they talked over a book. "I don't remember this." She carried it to the bed, perching on the side.

He looked at the photo she held out to him, forcing himself to focus on the image and not how close she was to him. "That was taken after the attack at the Ministry. You were still ... "

"Out of it?"

"Fragile. I was trying to distract you from the Order meeting happening in the next room."

She studied the photograph a bit longer, smiling at the younger version of herself who leaned into Remus as he pointed to something in the book on her lap. "My personal caretaker, huh?"

He gestured to the empty tray on his lap. "That's what we do."

"I don't think I can take this much longer," Harry grumbled, his feet clomping down the stairs in frustration.

Hermione looked up from her perch on the steps facing the basement door. It was just past midnight and Remus – no, Moony – had been making a racket for the better part of three hours. Both Harry and Hermione had been at Grimmauld Place when the werewolf was on the rambunctious side before, but tonight was worse than either could remember.

"I know," she replied, scooting over so Harry could sit next to her. They were quiet as they listened to the wolf's howl, the sound long and lonely. Only Padfoot's incessant barking managed to make him stop, but once he was quiet, the wolf started again.

"I spoke with Ron," Harry said. "We're more than welcome to stay there tonight."

"And you want to go, but feel bad about it."

He shifted and shrugged, avoiding eye contact. "A little."

"Harry," she placed a hand on his knee, squeezing lightly. "You and Ron have to meet with Kingsley tomorrow. Of course you need your sleep. Go. I'll explain to Remus and Sirius in the morning."

"You aren't coming?"

"No," she shook her head. "One night without sleep won't break me."

"If you're sure ..." he stood up reluctantly.

"Go. Oh – be sure to cast a silencing charm when you sneak into Ginny's room."

He laughed, ruffling the top of her hair. "Shut it."

Giving up her vigil on the steps, Hermione walked to the kitchen. She used her wand to empty the cupboards, piling food and dishes on the scarred oak table. She had noticed several expired items when she was putting away Molly Weasley's food earlier. If sleep wasn't going to happen, she might as well do something productive.

Humming, she filled a bucket with warm, soapy water, wiping down each shelf before charming the dishes to return to the cupboards in a system that made sense to her. The food was next, with half of the items ending up in the rubbish bin. Sighing, she grabbed a spare piece of parchment and made a list of things to replace, one hand on her hip as she studied the near-bare pantry.

"Hermione?"

She shrieked and dropped the parchment and quill. Spinning on her heel, she faced the intruder, her wand out in a defensive stance.

"Sorry," Sirius said, too distracted to poke fun at the young witch. He was leaning against the door, wearing only a pair of ripped jeans. His face was pale and he had several gashes on his arms.

"What happened?" She took his hand and pushed him into a chair. Dragging a second seat over, she sat, studying the injuries closely. Using her wand, she healed them quickly, rubbing her thumb absently over the deepest one near his left wrist.

"Moony," he replied in a tired voice. "Could you get me a glass of water, please?"

She did as he asked, swallowing her questions as he guzzled the clear liquid.

"Where's Harry?" he asked when he finished, smiling his thanks when she rose to fill it again.

"He left to sleep at the Burrow. He felt bad, but he has the meeting tomorrow and -"

Sirius waved his hand. "It's fine. Fine. In fact, it's better than fine. No questions this way."

"What do you mean?"

Sirius leaved forward, his eyes on Hermione. "I need you to come to the basement with me."

Her eyes widened.

"No! No, it's nothing bad. You'll be fine. Moony is locked in his cage, it's just ... he's agitated and I think if he saw you, saw that you're all right, he'll calm down."

"Why?" she asked.

He ran his fingers through his dark hair, wishing there was another way. "It's not my place to say. You don't have to, of course. But I thought it might help Remus."

He knew that wasn't entirely fair, but it was the right thing to say. She rose and waited for Sirius to do the same, following him out of the kitchen without a second thought, pausing only to grab her blanket and book from the landing. Sirius had his hand on the doorknob before he turned to look at Hermione.

"I'm going to go down first and become Padfoot. You come down when I bark." She nodded. "Once you're down there, don't touch me. I won't let anything happen to you, but you can't

acknowledge me. He won't like that."

"Should I ignore Moony, too?"

He shook his head, marveling at how easily she accepted his odd request and still managed to ask the right follow-up question. "No, look at him, talk to him. It will help. Just relax, stay calm. I'll conjure a chair for you within his eyesight but far enough away that you won't be scared. I'll settle in-between, OK? You'll be fine; I promise."

She nodded, flinching a little as she heard the crash of a heavy body against steel. Sirius opened the door and walked down the stairs. A few seconds later, there was a bark. Taking a deep breath, Hermione made her way to the basement, white-knuckling the blanket and book in her hands.

The basement was large; spanning the entire length of the house. One end was completely taken over by the steel cage Sirius had installed several years ago. The wolf sat inside, his hair on end as he watched her progress to the bottom of the steps. Ignoring the large black dog sitting in the middle of the floor, she smiled at the wolf and walked to the oversized armchair directly opposite from the cage, though several feet away.

"Hi, Rem – Moony," she said, her voice a little higher than usual. "I'm sorry you're having such a hard night. I thought it might help you if I sat here and read for a bit, all right?"

The wolf cocked his head, as if he was considering her request. Taking that as a good sign, she settled in the chair, covering herself with the blanket. The wolf watched, unblinking, as she got settled. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Padfoot lay down on the ground, his eyes trained on the wolf.

"Would it help if I read out loud?" She held up her copy of *Pride and Prejudice*. "I'm sure this is something you're read a million times, but sometimes there's nothing like reading an old favorite, right?"

The wolf still watched, but his fur looked less ruffled. She assumed that was a good thing and opened the book to the first page. Clearing her throat, she started to read. "'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.'"

She read aloud for nearly an hour. During that time, the black dog fell asleep and the wolf finally settled down. With his head resting on his large paws, his amber eyes never strayed from the chair. Hermione wished she had thought to bring a glass of water with her. She considered conjuring one, but wasn't sure how Moony would react if she took out her wand. "Um ... my throat is getting dry. Is it OK if I stop?"

The wolf whined deep in his throat. The dog sat up, growling.

"No!" she cried, forgetting Sirius' instructions to stay calm. "I'm not going anywhere; I just want to rest for a bit, OK?"

The two animals watched each other for several seconds before the dog laid down again. Taking that as an assent, Hermione settled deeper in the chair, using the armrest as a pillow. She stared at the wolf, his coat exactly like Remus' hair – it even had tiny streaks of gray woven within the strands of sandy brown. "You're beautiful, aren't you?" she whispered. "Good night."

Chapter 5

The room was nearly dark, the glow of a single candle the only light in the space. She couldn't see anyone, but she could hear him. Feel him. The heat. The strength. It called to her. She was helpless to ignore it.

"Hermione?"

"Mmpf."

A hand on her shoulder nudged gently. "Love, wake up."

She opened her eyes, confused to see Sirius' face just a few inches from her own. She sat up, her stiff muscles protesting at the movement. "What ...?"

"It's morning," he told her, standing up from his crouched position in front of the chair. "Let's go up and give Remus his privacy."

She peered over Sirius' shoulder and saw the cage door open, a pair of bare feet attached to uncovered legs lying on the floor. Blushing slightly, she quickly and quietly gathered her blanket and book, stood and shuffled to the steps, Sirius a few steps behind her. They were silent until they got to the kitchen, Sirius taking a seat with a heavy sigh as Hermione put on the kettle for tea.

"Thank you for your help." Sirius leaned forward to rest his head on the table. He was wearing the ripped jeans he had worn the night before, but had added a ratty T-shirt, which stretched tightly over his tattooed chest. She nodded, lost in her own thoughts. He opened his mouth to say something else, but thought better of it, sipping the mug of tea she set before him gratefully.

She sat in the chair to his left, her legs curled under her, cradling her own cup of tea in her hands. "Are you hungry?"

He shook his head. "I will be later. I just want to sleep."

She nodded. "Remus?"

"He'll be out for a while yet."

Another nod.

He finished his tea, standing to put the empty cup in the sink. Walking to the door, he paused behind Hermione's chair. He dropped a hand on her shoulder, squeezing it in silent gratitude. "I'll see you later?"

She nodded. He was halfway down the hall when she spoke. "How long has Remus known I'm his mate?"

Damn.

Turning, he walked back to the kitchen. "How long have you known?"

She shrugged, her gaze focused on the kitchen table; not him. "It wasn't that difficult to figure out; not after last night."

Taking the seat he'd abandoned seconds earlier, Sirius grasped for something to alleviate the tension in the room. Hermione looked, well, not shocked, but not at ease, either. He had no idea how Remus would react once he was back on his feet. "I didn't want to ask, Hermione, but it's getting harder for him. It has been since you came of age. With you in the house ... I was worried he'd hurt himself if he couldn't see you."

She bit her lip. "Is my being here bad for him?"

"No! He loves, *we* love, having you here. Yesterday, when I saw you two sleeping ... Hermione, I haven't seen Remus look that relaxed since we were students. You are good for him; never question that."

She nodded, still not looking at him.

"You have questions." Sirius said after a few minutes.

"Many."

"You know it's not my place to answer them."

"I do."

When a werewolf comes across their mate, they sense it. They want to be near the individual, to know everything about him or her. They want to spend time with the person. The werewolf will feel a sense of knowing, a feeling of peace, and they'll no longer feel so alone. Everything will feel right, happy, and complete when they're with their mate.

The words she wrote in her essay for Professor Snape haunted Hermione as she went about her morning. When he assigned the essay on werewolves her third year at Hogwarts, the concept of a mate, that one person that can complete a werewolf, seemed beautiful, like something out of a fairy tale. Once she realized Professor Lupin was a werewolf, she wanted him to find his mate, if only to keep him from being alone, but never in her wildest fantasies did she consider that she would be the one to fill that role.

Turning the heat off on the stove, Hermione placed a pile of scrambled eggs on the two plates that sat on two trays, along with bacon, sausage and toast. Tea was added next, along with glasses of juice and milk. Sirius had yet to come downstairs, so Hermione levitated each tray,

walking up to the third floor bedrooms. She left Remus' on the floor by his door and went to Sirius' room first, knocking on the door.

"Yeah?"

She took that to mean come in and pushed open the door, smiling at the man sprawled in his bed. "You look like hell, Sirius."

"Your morning talk could use some work, love," he replied sleepily, though his head lifted at the scent of bacon.

Stepping over the clothes he left on the floor, Hermione placed the tray on his nightstand. "It's almost lunchtime; eat something."

"OK." He rolled over, the bed sheets draping lower on his body. She avoided looking as he sat up; pretending delivering food to a naked man in bed was something she did every day. If he caught on to her embarrassment, he was kind enough not to say anything. Or maybe he was hungry.

"I have a tray for Remus," she began. "Should I leave it outside his room or will you ..."

"Why don't you take it to him?"

She looked over in surprise. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

He shrugged, his mouth full of eggs. Swallowing, he took a sip of juice before looking at her. "The two of you can't avoid each other forever. If it helps, I'm going to take off after this."

She nodded, but didn't move. Part of her – the sensible, analytical Hermione – knew the conversation she needed to have with Remus couldn't be avoided forever and that the sooner it took place, the sooner she would have the information she needed to move forward, whatever that entailed. Her emotional side, though, was conflicted.

Yes, she'd had a crush on Remus when she was a student; a crush that lasted longer than she was willing to admit and, if she was being honest, still flared up now and again. He was intelligent. Brave. Patient. He listened to her, *really* listened to her, when she spoke. It didn't matter that she was younger. He valued her opinion, her knowledge. He had a smile that made her insides melt and then there were his hands: large, strong; the scars and callouses proof of his strength.

But to be his mate?

"Hermione?"

She shook herself out of her reverie. "I'm sorry; what?" She looked at Sirius and was surprised to see his plate empty.

"Took a little trip, did you?"

She shrugged, her cheeks pinking slightly. Sirius gave her a sympathetic smile. "Not to rush you, but I need to get dressed so I can get out of here, so ..."

"Oh. Right." She turned to leave, her steps deliberate, stopping just before she got to the door. "How aware was Remus last night? I mean, I know the Wolfsbane is supposed to make it so Remus is in control, not Moony, but it didn't seem that way last night."

"He won't hurt you, if that's what you're worried about. Remus could never, *would never*, hurt you."

"I know that."

"I know that," she repeated to herself, tray in hand, as she knocked on Remus' door. There was no reply after the first knock, the second. Trying the handle, she was surprised when it turned.

"Remus?" she whispered, peeking inside. The curtains were drawn, but a sliver of sun shone through, almost like a beacon on the man face down in the bed. The naked man who was face down in the bed without any blankets covering his ...

Stop it.

She tiptoed into the room and set the tray on the night stand. Grabbing the bedspread from the tangled heap of blankets at the end of the bed, she pulled it over Remus, telling herself not to look, although she did pause at the scars that spanned his back, silvery-white lines overlapping in a convoluted maze. Pushing aside the sudden urge to trace each one with her fingers, she pulled the blanket up to his shoulders and walked to the curtains, opening them to let in the light.

"Dammit, Sirius!"

She chuckled. "I'm beginning to wonder how often he wakes you, given the greetings of the past two days."

He rolled over, his eyes bleary with sleep. "Hermione?"

"I brought you breakfast." She gestured to the tray. "Well, now it's more brunch. It's probably cooled some, but I know a warming spell that should make it edible. You need protein after the full moon, so there's bacon and sausages and eggs. I'm not sure how you feel about carbohydrates, but they're important for energy, so there's toast and jam – a little sugar kick to get you moving."

He sat up, grateful for the blanket that covered him, and listened to her babble, the chatter more soothing than annoying. Her demeanor, though, was off. He watched her hands through narrowed eyes. She had them clasped in front of her, so tight that her knuckles were practically white. The pad of her left thumb rubbed a constant circle in the center of her right

hand. She wouldn't meet his gaze, her eyes looking everywhere but him. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine."

She's lying.

He didn't need the wolf to tell him something so obvious. "Hermione."

She sighed and sat in his armchair. She drew her legs to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, as if to protect herself from whatever happened next.

Snatches of last night came back to him. Feeling angry. Feeling trapped. Wanting her; needing her. He could smell her. She was so close. He looked down at his chest, the fresh bruises evidence of the times he'd thrown himself against the cage, desperate to reach her. He remembered howling, screaming. Padfoot barking. Biting. It wouldn't stop. He couldn't stop, not until she ...

It's time, the wolf growled.

"Stop it," she snapped, angry at the conflict playing on Remus' face. Leaping up from the chair, she grabbed the tray and put it on his lap, her movements almost angry. "You need to eat and then we'll talk."

"Sirius ..." his voice was low, dangerous.

"He didn't tell me anything. I figured it out on my own."

The urge to fight left as quickly as it came. He looked down, waiting for the shame he expected to feel, was prepared to feel, at this moment.

"Remus. Remus, look at me."

He did. He couldn't decipher the expression on his face. It wasn't the fear he expected, nor was it disgust. She looked apprehensive, a little uncertain, but also empathetic. Somehow, that made him feel worse. He didn't deserve kindness from her.

"I know this is probably not the scenario you had in your head when you imagined this conversation."

He shook his head, not able to find the words to make things better. He wasn't even sure that was possible.

"And I'm sure there's a lot you want to say, but you're feeling a little exposed, for lack of a better word, at the moment."

He blushed at her words and nodded. He knew their conversation was always going to be awkward, but in every scenario he'd imagined over the years, at least he was clothed.

"You've had a rough night. Eat breakfast, take a shower and come downstairs. I'll either be in the kitchen or the study, but I'm not going to go anywhere until we talk. And don't think about killing Sirius; he left for the day and Harry is gone, too."

There was that know-it-all witch he watched grow up. For some odd reason, her bossiness made him feel a little better, though he still didn't trust himself to speak. He watched silently as Hermione took her wand, said a quick spell to heat his breakfast, and left the room.

Mine.

Chapter 6

She was mad. And frustrated. She wasn't exactly sure why she felt that way. It made her want to stomp down the stairs, but the rational voice in her head – and there was a small part of her that still knew how to be rational – said to do so would be childish, so she walked. She walked down the stairs, down the hall and entered the kitchen, where the sight of Sirius' breakfast dishes washed and put away – he *never* did that – made her grab a cup and throw it against the wall.

Feeling oddly better, she flicked her wand to clean up the shards of glass. She then dragged a chair to the counter, using it to boost herself up to the highest cupboard. It was a well-known fact that Remus had a chocolate addiction. It was true the sweet food could make you feel better after a dementor attack, but his consumption went beyond magical reasons. After months of his chocolate being devoured by the residents of Grimmauld Place, he started hiding stashes throughout the house. Harry, Ron and Sirius had discovered most of them – the obvious ones Hermione was fairly certain he used to keep them off the trail of his real hiding spots.

Hermione didn't think anyone besides Remus knew of the collection he had stashed inside the old cauldrons stored in the kitchen's highest cupboard. Not able to see in the cupboard, even when standing on her tiptoes, she felt around, her hand brushing against one bar. She debated leaving it for Remus but decided she needed it more. Hopping down, she took the chocolate and a glass of water to the study to await his arrival.

He felt better after eating. He was glad she left, as he was sure his table manners would have sent her running otherwise. Putting the tray back on the nightstand, he stood and stretched, mentally cataloguing every new ache and pain. Surprisingly, there weren't as many as there were a month ago. He was prepared for Hermione's presence in the house to have a negative impact on Moony, at least until Remus talked to her, *if* he talked to her. Perhaps Sirius had the right idea, letting her into the basement last night – not that he was letting his friend off the hook. They'd *talk* when he got home.

Walking to his bathroom, he took a shower, Hermione's words still ringing in his ears. She knew. She knew she was his mate. He wasn't aware how much she knew beyond that, but that fact that the news didn't result in her taking up the Weasleys' offer to live with them had to be a good thing. Hermione was a smart witch and a practical woman. She was an adult. They would sit and discuss the situation as grown-ups. He would ignore his desire to march downstairs, throw her over his shoulder and haul her to bed.

What if she wants it just as much?

Remus ducked his head under the water. He didn't want to think about Hermione wanting him. He couldn't. He had to be smart about this if it was ever going to work.

Hermione nibbled on her bottom lip as she studied her list of questions. She was pretty sure other people in her situation might simply yell "Are you crazy?" and be done with it, but she wanted to have a reasonable conversation with Remus, and get the answers she needed. To do both, she needed a list.

"Hi."

She looked up, the object of her frustration standing in the doorway, wearing worn khaki trousers and wrinkled blue button-down shirt, untucked. His sandy brown hair was damp from his shower and his feet were bare again. He held his breakfast tray in his hands.

"I'm going to put this in the kitchen and get something to drink. Can I get you anything?"

She shook her head, holding up her nearly full glass of water in response. He nodded and continued to the kitchen. She heard the dishes clink together as they were washed, smiling when she heard a cupboard door opened, then slammed closed.

"Looking for something?" she asked when he returned to the study, taking a seat on the other end of the couch. She held up the chocolate bar, her face a picture of innocence.

He grinned. "I wondered who knew about that spot."

She split the rest of the candy in half, leaning over to hand him his share. Her fingers grazed his during the exchange, sending a quick burst of pleasure to her stomach. She returned to her seat, schooling her features to be relaxed, while he took a bite of the chocolate. His gaze never left her face. "So ..." she started.

"You have questions."

"And then some."

He nodded. "Do you want to go first or should I start talking?"

"I would like to go first, if that's OK?"

He nodded again, turning sideways so he was facing her. Hermione did the same, looking down at her list even though she had every question memorized.

"How long have you known that I'm your mate?" she asked in a no-nonsense voice despite the trembling of her hands.

"Since before I saw you on the train."

Her mouth dropped open. "That long?"

He nodded, looking somewhat guilty.

"Before you saw me? That's possible?"

"I caught your scent before you and Harry and Ron entered the train car."

"What if we hadn't?"

"Then I would have gotten up and followed the scent."

She let that sink in. He watched her look down at her list and bite her lip, his answer obviously throwing her off her plan a bit. He'd let her regroup, taking a minute to study her and reassure himself that she was OK after last night. Dressed in hunter green shorts, white tank top and a gray hooded sweatshirt, she looked ... beautiful. Her hair was pulled back in a braid, although plenty of curls had escaped their confinement; curls she kept pushing away from her face in frustration. He fought the urge to bring his hand forward to tuck the strands behind her ear, ignoring the wolf's pants as he breathed in the scent that was Hermione. She had no idea what she did to him. The room was filled with her smell. Every time she moved, it swirled through the air, dragging him closer, filling him with so much need. He wanted to drag her to the floor, rip the clothes from her body, thrust deeply inside her and *end* his fucking agony!

Take her!

"So ... I smell?"

He brought himself back to her, snorting at the question, stopping when he saw her mutinous expression. "Sorry. No, you don't smell. You have this ... scent that is uniquely yours. It's not bad. In fact, it's my favorite scent in the world. The first time I smelled it, I felt something inside me slide into place and click, like everything I'd done up to that moment was so I could be there, in that train car, waiting for you."

"Did you know I was ..." she trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

"A student?"

She nodded.

"No, not until I saw you."

She cocked her head to the side, her eyes never leaving his. "What did you think then?"

He paused, not wanting to say the wrong thing. "I was ... surprised. Hermione, you have to understand that the chances of a werewolf finding his mate aren't great. I had been alone for so long, isolated, I figured it wouldn't happen, so to recognize your scent and feel complete was a miracle."

"Only I was 13."

"But that didn't *change* anything." He instinctively moved closer to her. "You were still *mine*. I knew that, but the feelings I had for you then, they were ... not parental, but protective. I

couldn't ignore them. It was automatic; my sole purpose in life was to keep you safe - which wasn't always easy, I might add."

She smiled, thinking of all she – and Harry and Ron – had done that year and the years that followed. "But you left Hogwarts," she said, her brows furrowed in confusion. "If you wanted to protect me, why didn't you stay?"

"Do you really think I still wasn't keeping an eye on you? I had my ways."

She couldn't explain the spread of warmth that went through her at his words; the same warmth she felt when he called her his earlier. She looked down at her parchment. "How long has Sirius known?"

He looked surprised, like he was prepared for something different. "Um ... not long after I figured it out. He helped keep an eye on you, too."

"Did you tell him?"

He shook his head in amusement. "I've known him more than half my life, Hermione. He knew."

"What did he think?"

"Probably what you're thinking – that I'm crazy. It wasn't easy for him to understand. He heard the word mate and he thought ... um, well ... *mating*," he confessed, blushing slightly. "Once I made him realize that wasn't my intent, he was more understanding."

"So, being your mate. What does that mean, exactly? That you want to make sure I'm safe?"

He sighed, running his fingers through his hair. He knew she'd ask, had years to prepare his answer, and he still didn't know what to say "Yes and no. I want to you safe. Your safety remains my top priority, but I also want to be with you. I want to know everything about you. I want to know what makes you happy, what makes you sad. I want to be the one who comforts you when you're hurt, who laughs with you when you're happy. I want to fall asleep with you at night and wake up with you in the morning."

"Sex, then," she said bluntly.

There it was. He wondered when she'd circle to that. Looking at her dead-on, he nodded. "That's part of it, of course. I know you're mine, but once we consummate the relationship, if we do, then the connection will be deeper. It's likely you'll feel how I feel now."

"But you don't know?"

He shook his head. "There's not a lot of information about this. It's not as if werewolves are lining up to share their stories and any I've met that were lucky enough to be with their mate ... it felt too intrusive to ask questions."

She couldn't explain the fluttering she felt in the depths of her stomach. It was a twitching sensation, but not an annoyance. Yet. "You want to sleep with me?"

"Yes." His tone was oddly matter-of-fact.

"I meant sex, not sleeping."

"Yes." His eyes never left hers. He didn't want to scare her. He didn't want to risk her running away, of refusing to see him again, but at the same time he wanted her to know that having sex with her would be more than that. He would worship her. He would dominate her. He'd romance her. He would make love to her and fuck her. He would make her gasp, make her scream. He would make her feel so good, she would have to choose him.

"Since when?"

He nearly smiled at that, a small grin that made her insides melt. He was dangerous when he looked at her like that, a combination of innocence and lust. "Since your 17th birthday."

"That long?"

He nodded.

"Why didn't you?"

"Well, there was a war going on," he said wryly. "I knew if I started a physical relationship with you, there was no way I'd have been able to let you go. I wouldn't have been able to stand back when you left with Harry and Ron to find the Horcruxes. The final battle ... Hermione, just knowing you were in the castle somewhere was bad enough. If our relationship had been intimate, the bond likely would have superseded all other circumstances. Neither one of us would have been safe."

That made sense. He knew she had a job to do and he respected that. That was one of the reasons she admired him so much, but what about after the war?

"You weren't ready," he told her.

"Excuse me?"

"You were going to ask me why I didn't do anything after Harry defeated Voldemort. You weren't ready."

"Or maybe you weren't," she retorted, back rising at the idea that he thought he knew best.

"That, too," he admitted.

She wasn't prepared for that response. "Don't you want me?"

The look on his face was fierce. "I want you more than I want my next breath," he practically growled. "If you knew the thoughts going through my head, the thoughts that constantly go through my head, you'd leave."

She was fascinated by the change in his expression, the ferocity of his voice. "Like what?" she whispered.

He shook his head. What would he tell her? That her scent drove him crazy? That her smiles practically killed him? That the way she sometimes casually touched him made him want to beg for more? That it took everything he had not to slam her against a wall and bury his cock deep inside her? He sat across from her at dinner last night and imagined dragging her across the table, laying her out and devouring every inch of her. He wanted her every way he could take her: on her back, on her knees, standing, sitting, in the shower, over a chair. He took a deep breath. "It's not easy controlling myself, to not give into my instincts. I do it because I have to."

She scooted closer on the couch. "And if I didn't want you to control yourself?"

The wolf sat up and howled. Remus gritted his teeth at the innocence of her question. She had no idea, no idea, what her words did to him. "What are you saying?"

She shrugged. "You want me. I'm your mate. I've had a crush on you forever -"

His eyes widened. "You have?" He couldn't believe what she was saying.

She nodded, moving forward until she was seated in front of him. Bringing her hands to his chest, she played with the buttons on his shirt, enjoying his quick intake of breath as she slid one button free and slipped her hand inside to brush against his chest. "So, why don't we?"

"Why don't we ... what?" His mind was swimming. Moony was pacing, howling, crying out for Hermione. He couldn't focus on him and on her. He closed his eyes, but a low moan spilled from his lips as he felt undo another button. Fucking Merlin, her hands on his skin felt amazing.

"Have sex," she said matter-of-factly.

His eyes snapped open. "You want to have sex?"

She nodded.

"Now?"

Another nod.

Finally!

Remus wanted to share the wolf's relief, but he stopped himself. His arms gripped Hermione's shoulders. "You don't know what you're asking for," he told her, *needing* her to understand the gravity of what she just said. "Right now, you can walk away. I haven't touched you. You still have a chance at a normal life."

"And you?"

"What about me?"

"If you don't ..." Hermione tilted her head, as if trying to find the right phrase.

"Claim you."

"Right. If you don't claim me, what happens to you?"

He shrugged. He'd asked himself the same question without ever finding the right answer. "I don't know; probably what's been happening."

"So you'd hurt yourself. You'd let Moony take his frustrations out on you," she said in a disgusted voice.

The words from her essay came back to her. *Finding one's mate is an easier process when the werewolf has connected with themselves; they know who they are and are comfortable in their skin.*

"You still haven't accepted the fact that you're a werewolf?"

He jerked away from her and stood up. She watched as he stalked around the room in an attempt to control himself as he considered his next statement. Walking to the fireplace, he turned to face her, his arms crossed, his gaze fierce. "Don't psychoanalyze me, Hermione."

She jumped up, too. "Why shouldn't I? I'm sitting here, considering whether or not I want to spend the rest of my life tied to you because of some mystical bond we supposedly have -"

"There is no supposedly," he growled lowly. "You're mine!"

" – and you're telling me the reason for this bond, your lycanthropy, is still something you haven't dealt with!" She marched until she was right in front of him, their difference in height making it difficult for her to look imposing when she was a foot short than him, but her face was fierce. "Remus John Lupin, you are a werewolf! You've been one for 35 years and you'll be one for the next 135, although that could be shorter if you insist on making me angry!"

He grabbed her, pulling her toward him, his lips crushing hers. Gasping, she wrapped her arms around his neck, standing on her toes to get closer. She felt ... she felt amazing! He groaned, pressing closer, wanting to bury himself inside her and never come out. He forced himself into her mouth, his tongue dueling with hers. She responded by wrapping one leg around his waist, rubbing herself against him, her moan making his blood boil. "Hermione," he whispered as he broke the kiss to lick his way down her neck, nibbling at her jaw. He sucked at where her neck met her collarbone, a spot that made her shiver.

"Remus ... please."

"What, sweetheart?" His voice was low, gravelly, and thick with desire. "What do you want?"

She hitched herself up, wrapping her legs around his waist. He stumbled, but didn't let her fall. His hands settled underneath her ass, boosting her higher so she was eye-level with him.

"I want you." She confessed, using kisses to put into words what she was feeling. It was like something in her had flipped and the only way she could right herself was to be with the man holding her. And she wanted that. She wanted it more than she ever imagined. "I want you so much. Please."

He shook his head. "We haven't ... sweetheart, there's so much we need to talk about ... you don't know what you're saying."

She laughed, grabbing his face in her hands, forcing him to look at her. "When have I ever not known what I'm saying?"

He opened his mouth to reply, then thought better of it and kissed her instead.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Warning: NSFW

Hermione couldn't stop kissing him. She'd been kissed before. There was Viktor Krum fourth year, a few snogging sessions with Ron, and an unfortunate incident under the mistletoe with Neville Longbottom, but none of those experiences prepared her for kissing Remus Lupin. The minute his lips touched hers, she felt desire, a need in her belly that she couldn't imagine would ever be filled. She wanted to get closer to him, to crawl over him, to pull him on top of her. She was in his arms, her legs wrapped around his waist, ankles locked, her hands gripping the back of his head as her tongue dueled with his, and it wasn't enough!

"Hermione," he gasped. "We need to ..."

She ran her tongue down his throat, loving the sound he made as he arched his head back to give her better access. She buried her face in his neck, sniffing the pine scent that always seemed to be part of him. Pine and chocolate. That was Remus.

"Please ..."

He shifted, turning so her back was to the wall. He pressed her against it, freeing one hand to grip her chin. He forced her to look at him. She was gorgeous. Her eyes were dark with desire, her lips bruised from his kisses. Curls were wild around her face. "Be sure," he warned her. "There's no going back from this."

"I'm sure," she promised, tightening her grip on his head to pull him forward, but he resisted.

"I mean it, Hermione," his voice was harsh, his tenuous grip on control slipping by the second. He increased his grip on her chin. "If I have you, that's it for me. For you. I won't let you go."

He waited for his answer; barely holding on to what little control he had left. She felt amazing in his arms, under his hands. He wanted to touch every inch of her, kiss every inch of her. He wanted her more than he ever thought possible. If she walked away, he would die. He'd let her go, but he'd never be complete.

"Remus," she smiled as she let her grip on his head loosen. She ran her fingers through his hair, her nails scratching his scalp in a way that made both man and wolf moan. "I don't want you to let me go."

That was enough for him. He released her chin, her ass, and let her slide down his body. She looked at him, confused, and then laughed as he swept her into his arms, planting kisses all

over her face as he left the study.

"I can walk," she cried as he took the stairs two at a time.

"I know, sweetheart. I've seen you do it."

"You're going to hurt yourself!"

"Are you calling me old, little girl?" Remus growled.

She leaned forward and nipped his ear. "Never," she whispered. "Hurry up, will you?"

He sprinted to the third floor and kicked open his bedroom door. The old wood barely struck the wall before he slammed it shut. Three large steps and they were by his bed, Hermione watching him with wide eyes. "I've dreamed about this for so long," he whispered, laying his forehead against hers. "All I want to do is make you happy. Tell me what to do, sweetheart. Tell me and I'll do it."

She traced his lips with her fingers, giggling when he nipped them. "Kiss me."

He did, gentler this time. He sat on the edge of his bed, cradled her in his lap and kissed her, putting everything he was, everything he ever would be, into it. He whispered her name, his hands weaved through her hair as he pulled her closer. Standing again, he twisted so he could lay her on the mattress, sliding her up until they were both on the bed, his body over hers. He kissed her feverishly, sinking into her mouth, branding her. Shifting to raise the upper half of his body, he balanced his weight on his forearms so he could look at her. "What do you like, sweetheart? How do you like to be kissed, to be touched?" he whispered. "Tell me."

She raised her head to kiss him again. "I don't know; just touch me."

He pulled back slightly, his eyes narrowing. "You don't know?"

She shook her head, her cheeks turning red, but she didn't break his gaze. "I've never done this."

He took a deep breath, his entire body shaking as he let it out. "You're a virgin?"

She nodded, biting her lip, her expression worried. "Is that OK?"

He wrapped his arms around her, rolling until he was on his back and she was above him. He nudged her shoulders until she was sitting up, her knees on either side of his waist, his length pressed against her heat. "Sweetheart, it is more than OK. It is amazing, more than I can ever ask for." Sliding the sweatshirt off her body, he tossed it across the room and slowly ran his hands up her arms, smiling as she trembled. He ran his hands down again, gripping her waist as he moved beneath her, pushing up as he pressed her body down.

"Oh God," she breathed.

"See what you do to me?" he asked, doing it again. "I am in a constant state of arousal around you. I see you and all I can picture is bending you over the closest piece of furniture and

sliding into you. I'd go so deep, Hermione. I'd hammer into you until your voice was raw from screaming."

He kept moving as he talked; slow, shallow movements, his grip on her waist loosening as she found the rhythm, her hands braced in his chest, eyes closed, lips parted, and she gently rode him. He ran his hands up her tank top, his palms sliding over her breasts, his groan matching hers.

"Can I take this off?" he asked, his hands at the bottom of her tank top. She nodded frantically, still moving, and he whipped it off. His fingers quickly unclasped her bra and he tossed that aside, too. "Oh, baby. You are so beautiful." He raised himself up to take one nipple in his mouth, sucking gently, never breaking tempo even as her movements became faster, frantic.

"Do you feel it building?" he whispered against her breast. "That ache that starts in the stomach and spreads throughout your body? It's going to feel so good when you let go, baby. Once you do, I'm going to flip you over, slide those tiny shorts down your legs, rip off your knickers and lick you. I'm going to put my tongue on you and lap up every inch of your sweetness until you come again."

"Remus ..." she moaned.

"Do you want that, sweetheart? Do you want to feel my tongue on you? In you? I'll show you want I want to do to you and after you come, I'm going to flip you again, bring you to your knees and take you, pounding into you until you don't know where you end and I begin. I'm going to take you, Hermione," he repeated fiercely, switching to her other breast. "I'm going to take you, fuck you, brand you, claim you. You. Are. Mine."

She screamed, her body breaking into a million pieces at his words, pleasure overtaking her. She was trying to catch her breath, to understand what just happened, when she felt him move over her, remove the rest of her clothes and his. She barely got a chance to appreciate his body when his head was between her legs, his tongue on her.

"Oh God!" she cried. Her hands grabbed his head; to push him away or pull him closer, she didn't know. She couldn't believe what he was doing, how good it felt. His tongue lashed at her clit, not giving her time to come down from the heights he'd driven her to moments before. She wanted. Oh, how she wanted, her hips moving in time with his tongue, gasping as his tongue slid inside her.

"You taste so good, baby," he murmured. He shifted, nudging her legs further open with his shoulders, sliding a finger deep inside her as his tongue continued to explore her folds. "You are so tight, sweetheart. Soon I'm going to slide inside you, feel your heat around me, feel you as you come."

She gasped, his words making something inside of her tighten. She wanted to move away. It was too much, but she couldn't. It felt so good.

"You're almost there, baby, just a little bit more." He circled her bundle of nerves with his tongue, pulling it gently into his mouth as he curled his finger inside her, the simultaneous

movement making Hermione scream again, her upper body coming up off the bed before it slammed back down, her chest heaving as she struggled to catch her breath. Remus licked her softly through her orgasm, his movements designed to soothe, relax, as he slowly worked his way up her body, licking, kissing. "You are gorgeous," he whispered against her lips. "I could watch you come all day, all night."

She brushed her hair out of her face, her arms heavy. "Remus ..."

"Hmm?" He nibbled her ear lobe, his tongue darting out to trace around the rim.

"I want you."

He kissed the tip of her nose. "I want you, too."

She grabbed his face, drawing on what little energy she had left to hold him still. "I. Want. You. Inside. Me. Right. Now."

He grinned, the expression on his face reminding her that he was a marauder. "Your wish, sweetheart."

Diving in for one more kiss, he backed off her, bringing her body up until they were both kneeling on the bed. He wrapped his arms around her, deepening the kiss, his hands roaming all over her back, sliding down her ass, dipping into her heat.

"Remus!"

Laughing, he turned her around, helping her to her hands and knees. Moving behind her, he pushed her hair to one side and leaned down, his mouth to her ear. "Last chance," he whispered, hoping she wouldn't say no. The wolf was pawing, impatient, screaming at him to take her.

Now!

"Fuck me," she replied.

With a shout, he slid into her, the penetration making Hermione gasp. Her eyes filled with tears. It was too much, she was too full. Remus wrapped an arm around her waist, keeping her in place, as he leaned over her, his other hand keeping his balance. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, I'm sorry. Breathe, baby."

She could feel him tremble as he held himself still, giving her a chance to get used to him. The pain disappeared as quickly as it came. She forced herself to relax, shivering as his hand around her waist moved lower, brushing lightly against her folds.

"OK?" He pulled back slightly.

She nodded, groaning as he pressed forward.

"Again?"

"Yes," she breathed, closing her eyes. His fingers continued to play lightly as he slowly moved in and out of her. She pushed back the next time he pushed forward, loving his groan in response.

"You're killing me ..."

She did it again, gasping as his fingers pressed into her heat.

"More," she demanded.

He moved faster, harder. His fingers danced around her, teasing the bundle of nerves. She could feel the pressure building again, could feel how tight Remus was holding himself, his labored breath in her ear the only sign that he was holding back, determined to give her pleasure first.

"Harder," she groaned, gasping as he complied, the hand that wasn't touching her gripping her shoulder to hold her in place. She could hear the slap of their bodies as he moved, no – pounded. His control, the control he was always so careful to hold on to, was slipping. She wanted that. She wanted him out of control. "Now!" she yelled. "Remus, fuck me now!"

That did it. With a growl, his fingers pinched her clit, immediately setting her off. She gasped, stars exploding behind her eyes as he ground into her. His upper body moved over hers, his skin hot on hers as he thrust, his mouth on her neck. She felt him lick the spot where her neck met her shoulder. She felt him nibble the delicate skin, but she didn't feel him bite. He did, though, breaking the skin as he came inside her, his seed pouring into her until he was empty. He collapsed on top of her, completely spent, the pounding of his heart echoing in his ears. Sliding his hands up her arms, he laced his fingers through hers, shifting until they were on their sides, his body wrapped around her.

"I love you, Hermione Granger," he whispered, grateful he could finally say the words out loud. "I will always love you."

Chapter 8

They slept.

The sun was still shining when Hermione stirred, but hours had passed, hours in which neither had moved, their fingers still laced together, Remus' arms around her, one leg over her two, effectively pinning her in place. She tried to shift, but she was no match for him. Who knew he had such sinewy muscles underneath his baggy clothes? She had missed her opportunity to study him earlier, Remus so intent on bringing her pleasure, making her feel good, she felt like she was more along for the ride than an active participant. Not that she thought he would complain. Judging by the way he had collapsed on top of her, he enjoyed himself, too – a thought that made her smile in satisfaction.

"I can hear the wheels turning," he mumbled from behind her. "What's going through that brain of yours?"

She shifted again and this time he let her. She rolled over to face him, smiling at the relaxed look on his face. "Hi," she whispered.

"Hi," he whispered back, kissing her forehead. He brushed her hair back from her face, his gaze intent as he looked at her. "Are you OK?"

"Never better," she answered honestly. "You?"

He smiled, looking years younger. "I don't have the words."

"Really?"

"Really," he promised as he rolled to his back, bringing her with him. She trailed her fingertips through the light brown hair that covered his chest, tapering to a V down his body. She followed the trail with her fingers, her movements hesitant as they moved lower. "Is it OK if I ..."

His expression was tender. "I'm yours, sweetheart. You can do anything you want."

She blushed, but continued her exploration, smiling at his sharp intake of breath as her first touch. She wrapped her hand around him, brushing a finger over the tip. "Oh!" she cried, sitting up.

"What?!" He sat up, too. "Are you hurt? What is it?" He ran his hands over her arms, looking for something to explain the panicked look on her face.

"We just ... I didn't say anything ... are we going to ..." She didn't know how to word it.

He exhaled, relieved. "No. You aren't going to get pregnant."

"How do you know?"

"I said the spell."

She nodded, feeling better. Not that she doesn't want kids, but that was someday. Someday far, far into the future.

"OK now?" he asked, lying down again.

"Mmm-hmm," she replied, her eyes taking in the man before her. Long, lean. She could see the definition of his muscles on his chest, his stomach. His arms – no wonder she couldn't get out of his grip. And his legs. She ran her hand down one, smiling when he jerked his foot away.

"Ticklish?" she grinned.

"Don't even," he growled.

She tucked that piece of information away for another day and resumed her exploration. "It's not fair," she told him.

He folded his arms behind his head, perfectly at ease with this naked body. "What's not fair?"

Hermione loved the small smile that played on his lips, leaning forward to kiss it lightly.

"You. How can you eat as much as you do and look like this?"

He closed his eyes. "Werewolf thing."

"Hmm. I'd embrace being a werewolf for that alone."

He didn't respond, the conversation obviously not one he wanted to have at the moment. She filed that away for later, too.

Hermione crossed her legs, well aware that she was sitting on Remus' bed without a stitch on and didn't feel an ounce of embarrassment. She thought she would. She expected to, but he was hers. He said so himself. She couldn't imagine being shy in front of someone who planned on spending the rest of his life with her. "Are you tired?" she asked him.

"A little."

"Are you hungry?"

"A lot."

"All right," She crawled over his body and off the bed. Reaching for his discarded shirt on the floor, she pulled it on. He opened one eye.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to get us something to eat."

He sat up. "I can get it."

"There's no need." She buttoned a few buttons, leaving the rest undone, not missing the look of approval he gave her. The end of his shirt just barely grazed the tops of her knees. Leaning forward, she kissed the tip of his nose. "I'll be right back."

He watched her walk out, part of him wanting to grab her, pull her back to bed and make love all over again. He had no idea how responsive she'd be; how her moans and sighs would make him feel. The fact that she is – *was* – a virgin made everything that much better. He would be the only one to ever touch her, to ever slide inside her and hear those tiny breaths she took before she let go, the only one to see her face when she did.

He sat up, looked ruefully at the clothes tossed around his room, the blankets pulled up from the bed, but he didn't pick them up. He reached for his boxers, sliding them on. If he had his way, neither one of them would be dressed much longer.

Hermione loved Molly Weasley. She forgot about the sandwich meat the woman had sent home with her yesterday. The roast beef, ham and turkey was a blessing. She made a turkey sandwich for herself, then one of each for Remus, piling all of them on a plate with a bowl of grapes and an orange. Adding "fresh fruit" to the grocery list she started last night, Hermione filled a pitcher with water, placed two glasses on the tray, and carted everything upstairs.

"You know you can use magic," Remus remarked as she carefully made her way to the bed. The weight of the tray made her arms shake with effort.

"I know," she replied, smiling gratefully as he took the tray. She crawled over him to reclaim her earlier spot. "But sometimes it means more to do things the Muggle way. I can't explain it."

He smiled. "You don't have to."

They were quiet as they ate. Remus leaned against the headboard, Hermione sat cross-legged by his legs. One hand rested on his knee, a casual gesture she wasn't even aware of but made him feel ... He wasn't lying earlier when he said he didn't have the words. All he knew was that this moment, right now, was worth all of the years of loneliness, the years of pain. She was everything he ever imagined and more.

"I could get used to you bringing me meals in bed," he told her after finishing the second sandwich.

"Don't," she laughed. "If I start doing it for you, Sirius and Harry are going to ..."

She trailed off, her face wary. He sighed. He had wondered when the real world was going to intrude. Putting the plate on the nightstand, he waited for her to speak.

"Sirius knows," she said.

"He does."

"He's going to know what we did."

"Most likely. I imagine he left hoping for this."

She blushed. "What will he say?"

"Nothing; not unless we want him to. Hermione, Sirius would never say or do anything to embarrass you. He understands this, more than you realize, and he wants me, *us*, to be happy."

"What about Harry? Ron? The Weasleys? Professor McGon -"

He leaned forward, placing his finger on her lips. "Let me just stop you there and say 'What about everyone who's ever known us,' all right?" She nodded. He gathered her in his arms, pulling until she was sitting on his lap, smiling as she automatically wrapped her legs around his waist. He brushed her curls back and pulled on his shirt until his bite mark was exposed. He traced it gently with his finger. "Some people will understand and some will need some time. I wish I could tell you everyone will be happy, but I doubt it. I'm 20 years older than you -"

"Nineteen," she corrected.

"Nineteen," he conceded. "I was your teacher -"

"Years ago," she interrupted.

"Years ago," he agreed in a slightly exasperated voice. He leaned forward to lick his mark. "I'm not worthy of you," he said quietly.

"I don't agree." She linked her hands behind his neck, her fingers playing with the ends of his hair. "You are very, very worthy of me, Remus Lupin."

"You think so?"

"Well ... perhaps you need to convince me -"

She shrieked when he flipped her to her back, his body settling over hers. "You were saying?" He pressed his cock into the apex of her thighs, smirking as she sighed.

She dug her heels into the bed, raising herself to meet his thrusts. "You talk too much."

"Ohmigod!"

"What?" he called from his bed.

"Your bathroom!" She turned in a circle, taking in the room that was nearly the size of her bedroom. The shower could fit three people easily, but it was the hot tub on the other end that

had her mouth hanging open. "How have I not known this existed?"

A pair of arms circled her waist. "You think you and Harry are the only ones Sirius spoils?"

"Not like this!"

He chuckled and kissed the top of her head before walking to the tub to start the water.

"If I had known he was willing to do this, I would have asked for more than bookshelves in my bedroom," Hermione told him.

"He redid your bathroom, too." Remus sank into the warm water. He crooked a finger in her direction, sighing as she settled in front of him, her back against his chest.

"Not like this," she repeated, closing her eyes on a contented sigh. "I'm using yours from now on."

"What's mine is yours, sweetheart."

"About that ..."

"Yes."

She sat up and turned to face him, touching the mark on her skin. It didn't hurt; not really. It didn't even scab over despite happening just hours ago, instead healing into a pale white scar several shades lighter than her skin. "This is your mark."

He touched it, feeling that familiar wave of possessiveness that washed over him every time he touched her. She was his. For the rest of their lives, she was his. "Yes."

"Does this mean I'm claimed?"

"It does."

"So the whole 'No going back' thing ..."

"It's no longer an option, Hermione," his voice wasn't harsh, but it was fierce. "We're linked, you and I. I'm yours, you're mine. That will never change. Are you ... are you OK with that?"

She smiled shyly. "Earlier, before we fell asleep, you said you loved me."

He remembered. "I did. I do."

Moving until she was perched above him, she kissed his forehead, the tip of his nose, the lobe on one ear and then the other. "Then I'm OK," she whispered before settling her lips over his in a gentle kiss. She wasn't ready to say the words back, not yet, but she knew she loved him. Her teenage infatuation, her admiration – none of it compared to the feelings she had coursing through her now. All she wanted was to be with him, to touch him, to make him happy. If she wasn't so sore ...

"Screw it," she muttered seconds before she impaled herself on him. Her hands gripped his shoulders, her fingernails left crescent moon shapes on his skin as she moved, ignoring the water that splashed on the floor.

"Baby," Remus groaned, eyes hooded as he watched her rise over him. "Sweetheart, you have to be sore."

"Don't care," she insisted. "You can either join me, Remus, or -"

He didn't let her finish her sentence, leaning forward to kiss her roughly. His hands gripped her hips, his grip adding to the bruises that were already there. She hissed, in pleasure, not pain, and kept moving. "Ride me, sweetheart. Just like that. I want to feel you find it, feel you grip me before you come all over my cock."

She moaned, eyes closed, his words bringing her that much closer to release. She raised, she lowered. She could feel the fluttering in her stomach. She was close, so close. "Remus ..."

"What do you need?"

"Ah ... touch me ... please."

He slid one hand to the wet curls between her legs, his fingers quickly finding the bundle of nerves pulsing. Rubbing it softly between two fingers, he leaned forward to lick one nipple.

"Harder."

"Not yet." He switched to her other nipple.

She groaned, her legs shaking as she tried to keep her rhythm. Three times. Three times he's taken her, each time his strength, his stamina outlasting her. Dammit, she was going to break him this time! "You feel so good," she murmured. "I love feeling you hard cock inside me, pulsing. I'm so full of you, Remus. I love when you let go, when you shout my name."

"Hermione ..."

"Close," she smirked, leaning down to whisper in his ear. "I'm so close. Don't you want to feel me come? Don't you want to feel me squeeze you?"

He turned his head to find her lips, but she backed away, a teasing smile on her face.

"Hermione," he growled.

She slowed her movements, loving what she was doing to him. His legs were taut, the one hand he still had on her hip painful. He was still rubbing her with light pressure, but she could tell he wanted to go harder, to make her come, so he could follow.

Not this time.

She leaned forward again, her lips where his neck met his shoulder. "You're mine, Remus Lupin," she whispered, biting him. He shouted, his hips thrusting up and he came, yelling her

name. She followed seconds later, feeling utterly complete and spent at the same time. She felt him leave her body, as she slid down one last time, her head coming to rest over his heart.

"I'm going to get you for that, Hermione Granger," he threatened in a sleepy voice, his arms heavy as he wrapped them loosely around her.

"Do your worst."

Chapter 9

He looked in the mirror, smiling at the red mark Hermione's teeth left when she bit him earlier. She didn't break the skin, her teeth weren't sharp enough for that, but he understood the symbolism of it. She wanted to mark him the way he'd marked her. He understood that feeling of possessiveness well. He'd been dealing with it for nearly six years, after all.

He left the top two buttons of his shirt undone so she could see her handiwork and left the bathroom. His bedroom still smelled like Hermione, her scent lingering in the air. She only left a few minutes ago, claiming she needed to get dressed before making dinner, an announcement that led to several attempts to change her mind. "Later," she had promised, leaving the room in one of his shirts, her own clothing clutched in her hands. He didn't remember ripping her shorts and felt bad that he didn't feel guilty about it.

He stripped the sheets off his bed and said a spell to set his room to rights. He opened the window to let in the fresh air. He stood by the window to watch the sun set for a minute, enjoying the peace the view brought him the day after the full moon.

The wolf was quiet, content.

He was, too.

"Damn," Hermione muttered. The scar on her skin was still visible after several different glamour spells. She considered pulling her hair into a side braid, but that only drew attention to her neck.

"Problem?"

She saw Remus in the mirror's reflection, his gaze curious as he leaned against her bathroom door.

"I can't cover this," she gestured to her neck. "Do you know a spell I don't?"

He walked forward, resting one hand on her shoulder. The other brushed aside her hair so he could kiss her cheek. "Why do you want to cover it?"

"Harry and Sirius will be home soon and ..." her voice trailed off and she shrugged.

He pushed aside his irritation at the thought that she wanted to hide his mark from the world, telling himself that she was thinking of the others, how they might react to the news and she wasn't ready to deal with that. Not yet. "There isn't a spell."

"What?" She turned to face him, noting that while his expression was sympathetic, his eyes were dark. She knew that look. It was the look gets just before he'd slid inside her. It was

dominant, possessive. Moony.

"That's the point, Hermione. Others see it and know you've been claimed."

She let out a huff of frustration. That's all fine and good, but with her Harry and Sirius due home any minute, she really didn't feel like having the conversation their reactions would generate. She pushed past Remus and walked to her wardrobe, swapping the light purple scoop-neck T-shirt for a short-sleeved navy blue collared shirt. She left the top button undone, confident that the shirt covered enough of Remus' handiwork. Going back to the bathroom, she pulled her hair into a ponytail and said a spell for the scars on her arm that, thankfully, could be covered by magic. She missed the dark look that crossed Remus' face as he watched, his hands clenched as she brushed her hand over her arm so that the letters spelling MUDBLOOD disappeared. He had many regrets in his life, but his biggest would always be that Molly Weasley killed Bellatrix before he could get to her.

Remus knew she kept it covered to protect Sirius. The pureblood wizard carried a lot of guilt because of his family; guilt he tried to assuage by taking care of the people he cared about. Some would think his gifts, his attention, his endless attempts to make Grimmauld Place a home were a sign of boredom. Remus knew it was because, deep down, Sirius didn't want to be left alone. The day Harry moved in was probably one of the happiest Sirius had since James and Lily died. When Hermione asked if she could live at his house, too, he immediately went into full home improvement mode to ready the house for their arrival, bringing light to a place known for being dark.

"Ready?" she asked.

He nodded, taking her hand as they walked to the kitchen. She got to work preparing dinner while waving her hand in the general direction of the cupboards, a silent request he learned long ago that meant "Set the table and stay out of my way." Only when he opened the cupboard to get the plates, they weren't there.

"Hermione?"

"Yes?"

"Where are the dishes?"

"Oh, I rearranged things last night. The way it was before didn't make sense."

He opened another cupboard. Still no plates. "It's always been that way."

"And it always didn't make sense," she replied, settling a pot of peeled potatoes on the stove to boil.

Shaking his head, Remus, opened cupboards until he found what needed. The next few minutes passed in comfortable silence, the pair used to working around each other. His part done, Remus sat at the table and unwrapped the bite-sized piece of chocolate he stashed in the very back of the cutlery drawer, and popped it in his mouth. He rolled his eyes when she told him he was going to spoil his appetite. He was always hungry. Add the fact that he was

still recovering from last night and spent most of the day in bed with her, it was going to take a lot more than one piece of chocolate to keep him from finishing a meal.

"What did you do for food while I was gone?" Hermione brought a pitcher of water to the table.

"We ate out a lot," Remus told her. "Molly took pity on us, too."

"You'd think two wizards who helped create the Marauder's Map when they were students could figure out simple kitchen spells," she grumbled half-heartedly. Truth be told, she didn't mind cooking. It was soothing, actually; a chore that had a beginning and an end. Plus, preparing meals freed her from cleanup which, despite the aid of magic, still wasn't fun.

Remus opened his mouth to reply, but the fireplace turned green before he could. Sirius stepped out first, followed by Harry a minute later.

"Hello everyone," Sirius greeted. He looked at Remus, then Hermione. His cautious expression gave way to a smile when he noticed the mark on her shoulder. Rounding the table, he pulled Remus up for a quick hug. "Good on you, Moony."

Harry watched the exchange in confusion. Turning to Hermione, she shrugged and quickly changed the subject.

"Did the meeting with Kingsley go well?"

"It was brilliant," he replied, the odd behavior of his father's two best friends forgotten as he walked everyone through his day, beginning with breakfast at the Burrow and ending with his auror training schedule. "I start tomorrow."

"So soon?" Hermione asked. "I thought you'd get a break first."

"I guess they think the last few weeks were enough of a break already," he replied, avoiding her gaze. "Besides, Ginny goes back to school soon. There's really no reason to delay it, right?"

Hermione nodded half-heartedly. That was it, then. Harry and Ron would become aurors, like they always wanted. Ginny and Neville and Luna would go back to school. Percy would return to work at the Ministry. Fred and George had their store. Charlie was back with his dragons. Bill and Fleur were going to be parents. Everyone was moving forward with their lives. Everyone but her.

Remus watched as Hermione pushed the remainder of her dinner listlessly around her plate, her enthusiasm for Harry's play-by-play diminishing the longer he talked.

"Anyway," Harry pushed back from the table and placed his dishes in the sink. "I told Ginny I'd stop by tonight. Any of you want to come, too?"

Hermione shook her head, as did Remus. Sirius considered the invitation for a second, but his curiosity was too great. "I think I'll stay here, Harry."

"Sure," he replied. They all heard his feet pounding up the stairs a moment later.

"It was really quiet here without the two of you," Sirius announced, breaking the melancholy mood that had settled in the room. Hermione snorted.

"I'm sure the two of you wallowed the entire time," she replied.

"Remus wanted to, but I forced him out," Sirius told her. "I knew you wouldn't want to come home to a shell of a man; no fun shagging someone who isn't up to the task, right?"

"Padfoot," Remus cautioned in a low voice. Hermione just laughed, feeling better. She cleared the rest of the dishes, giving Remus a kiss on the cheek before winking at Sirius. "I, for one, am grateful," she told him.

"See? I told you, Remus. If ever there was a girl up to spending the rest of her life with a moody werewolf, it was our Hermione."

"*My* Hermione." Remus corrected.

Sirius shrugged. "Whatever." He leaned back in his chair and watched as Remus helped Hermione clean the kitchen. He was sure they weren't aware of how *right* they looked together, how they anticipated the others' need without either one saying a word. They had always shared an easy friendship, bonding over books and theories and all other intelligent things that, frankly, bored him to tears, but now there was an intimacy about them. He watched as his friend rested his hand against the small of Hermione's back, the way she leaned into him. Remus looked ... happy. He was happy. That was all Sirius needed to know; not that he wasn't opposed to asking for details, should either one ever feel the need to share further. "So ... everything is well?"

Hermione turned around, wrapping her arm around Remus' waist. He responded by kissing the top of her head. "Everything is well," she replied.

He grinned. "I don't have to sleep with one eye open for the foreseeable future?"

"Not this time," Remus told him.

"Works for me." Not wanting to push his luck, Sirius decided to spend the rest of his evening in his room, standing up from his chair to leave when Harry came marching into the kitchen, looking furious.

"What the hell is this?" he demanded, holding out a piece of parchment. Hermione blanched when she saw her handwriting. It was her list of questions for Remus. She had left it in the study.

"Answer me!" Harry yelled. He shoved past Sirius to march in front of Remus, who had pushed Hermione behind him. "What did you do? Did you touch her?"

"Harry -"

"I'm asking Remus, Sirius; not you!"

Hermione placed her hand on Remus' arm. She could feel his tension, his anger. She tried to move around him, but he pushed her back again.

"You did, didn't you?" Harry whispered. "You honestly believe she's your mate?"

"She is," Remus replied, his voice low. "And if you want to talk about this rationally, I will, but only when you've calmed down."

"Calmed down?" You're 20 years older than her! You've known her since she we were kids! What kind of a sick man -"

"That's enough!" Remus roared, making everyone jump; even Sirius. "I'm taking Hermione to her room. I'll meet the two of you in the study in a few minutes." Without waiting for an answer, Remus grabbed Hermione by the hand and pulled her from the kitchen, his stride angry as he walked down the hall and up the stairs, his grip on her almost crushing. He opened her bedroom door and pulled her inside, immediately bringing her into his arms. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm so sorry."

She wrapped her hands around his waist, squeezing tight, trying to forget the look of disgust on Harry's face. She knew this was going to be difficult. Not everyone was going to be like Sirius, but she assumed Harry would be on her side, like he always was.

"I'm going to make it better, all right?" He pulled away, tucking a finger under her chin and lifting her head so he could look at her, desperately wishing the tears in her eyes wouldn't fall. He couldn't comfort her right now. He had to deal with Harry. He had to make this right, had to make Harry understand. Remus knew how close Hermione and Harry were. She couldn't be happy without his support.

"I want to go with you."

"You can't."

She stiffened at that, backing out of his embrace. "Excuse me?"

"You can't be there."

"Remus, I know I'm new to the whole concept of being your mate, but this concerns me, too. Harry is my best friend. I need to be there."

"And I need you to stay here," he replied, holding his temper in check. "Harry's a threat right now."

"He's not a -"

"He's a threat," he repeated, eyes flashing. "I can't have you around him until he's calmed down." He grabbed her by the arms, lifting until she was eye-level with him. He kissed her fiercely and left the room, shutting the door behind him. She was still trying to process his words when she heard the lock click. She ran to the door and pulled. It didn't budge. She reached for the wand that was tucked in her back pocket, but it was gone.

I'm going to kill him.

Chapter 10

"I can't believe you're OK with this!" Harry was shouting when Remus got to the bottom of the stairs.

"Not everything in life is black and white, good and bad, right and wrong, Harry!" Sirius yelled back, making his godson turn away in frustration as Remus walked into the room.

"Where's Hermione?" Harry demanded.

"Her room."

"How'd you manage that?" Sirius asked.

Remus put Hermione's wand on the coffee table, flinching when Harry sucked in his breath.

"She is going to kill you," he whispered.

"I don't know what I'm doing." He collapsed in an armchair and stared at the wand. He'd regretted his actions the second he shut her door. It wasn't something he'd ever done, or ever considered doing, but when Harry had stormed into the kitchen, his only thought was protecting Hermione. He wanted her away from Harry, away from the situation, and in that moment, he didn't care how. It was pure instinct. Protect his mate. He ran his fingers through his hair and looked at Sirius, his eyes pleading. "I don't ... she's got me tied in knots. All I want to do is take care of her, keep her safe, and she is going to fight me every time. Every. Single. Time."

"Well, yeah," Harry said. "She's Hermione."

Sirius didn't think it was possible, but Remus paled even more. He exchanged a look with Harry, who sat on the couch, his outrage forgotten as he stared at his former Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. This was the man who taught him the Patronus Charm, who made him believe that he and his friends could take on the Death Eaters. He was a werewolf and he was trembling – *his hands were actually shaking* – because of a witch who was nearly a foot shorter than he.

"Um ... Sirius kind of told me a little about this whole mate business," Harry looked down at his hands. "He made it sound like you didn't have a choice."

"I didn't. I don't."

"Why?"

He sighed. "I don't know, Harry; why does anyone love the person they're supposed to be with?"

His eyes widened. "You love her?"

"More than anything."

Harry sat back. He didn't know what to think; he hadn't since he picked up that parchment and saw Hermione's writing. She had a list of questions. Questions about her. About Remus. About him claiming her. About them being together. It didn't make sense. Hermione was his friend. Remus was ... he was kind of like a father. The idea of the two of them together, behind his back – he snapped.

Hermione always told him he held too much inside. She was right. Again.

"You recognized her when you first saw her?" Harry asked to clarify the story Sirius told him.

"Before," he replied, eyes still on the wand. "I recognized her scent."

"Did you ... did you want to ..."

"No!" He jumped up and started pacing, a reaction Sirius preferred over his blank stare. "I am so tired of being made to feel like a dirty old man every time I have to explain this! Werewolves have mates! It happens when they recognize each other and, if they are lucky enough to find each other, they'll be together forever. When I met Hermione, when I knew she was mine, I did *not* want her! She was a child! I may be a damn werewolf, but I still have *some* decency!"

"Calm down, Remus! Harry asked a simple question; one you'd ask if the situation was reversed."

Remus nodded and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Harry. No, I didn't want her in a physical sense until she was of age."

"But even then ..."

"I waited. She was a little involved in other matters," he said ruefully.

Harry couldn't stop his smile. "You know we couldn't have done it without her."

"And now I can't live without her." Remus sat on the couch.

Harry nodded, his face thoughtful. Sirius watched as his godson took in the information. He had James' temper: react first, think later. He'd seen Harry angry before, but the look on his face after Remus and Hermione left the kitchen – he didn't blame Remus for his response. Not giving Hermione the chance to speak probably wasn't the best course of action, but he's never been in love, so what did he know?

"What happens now?" Harry asked.

Remus shrugged. "We're figuring it out as we go along."

"But you um ... the two of you are, I mean, you have –"

Remus nodded.

"So that's that? The way Sirius explained it is now that you've, um ... now that you have, it's official."

Remus shifted uncomfortably, but nodded again.

"Does she love you?"

He shook his head slowly. "I don't know. She will. There can't be a connection like ours without love, but she hasn't said it."

"She probably does," Harry told him. "She wouldn't be with you if she didn't love you, especially since she hasn't -" He broke off, as if he was about to blurt out a great secret.

"You know," Sirius said, "it's safe to assume Hermione is up there plotting Remus' death right now. If she was to find out what we're talking about ..." He slid his index finger across his neck.

"Right." Harry stood up. "Um, I can't suddenly pretend that this isn't still weird, Remus, but I want to apologize for my outburst earlier." He held out his hand. Standing, Remus took it and pulled Harry into a brief hug.

"I can feel the love, guys," Sirius grinned.

"Shut up, Sirius," Harry and Remus said together.

"I'm going to go apologize to Hermione," Harry said. "Do you want me to take her wand to her?"

Remus handed it over. "Maybe you could mention how sorry I am?"

Harry didn't bother hiding his grin. "Not to be mean, but I'm kind of out for me first, Remus."

He sighed heavily. "Fair enough."

Hermione looked at her reflection. The green halter dress was an impulse buy; something she purchased in Sydney in attempt to make herself feel better after another failed attempt to find her parents. She never thought she'd wear it, but seeing as it covered Remus' mark, she might just invest in one of every color.

"Hermione?" Harry called through the locked door. "It's me. May I come in?"

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Do you have my wand?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to apologize?"

"Yes."

"Come in."

He did, opening the door just slightly so he could slide her wand through first. Hermione laughed and opened the door all the way. She grabbed Harry's hand and tugged him inside before slamming the door closed. She did her own locking spell, adding a silencing charm for good measure. "Have a seat," she said, gesturing to the chair. She sat on her bed, twirling her wand between her fingers, the look on her face similar to the one she had after punching Draco Malfoy.

"I'm sorry for yelling," he started. "I shouldn't have ... I'm just sorry, OK?"

She raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, come on, Hermione. I already had to have one uncomfortable conversation. Please don't make me do it again."

"If this makes you uncomfortable, Harry, then we still have a problem."

"We don't. We won't," he promised. He joined her on the bed. "It's going to take more than a day, but if you're happy, I'm happy for you. Are you happy, Hermione?"

"Aside from the past hour, yes, I'm happy."

"He's who you want?"

She smiled. "Even before I knew him."

Harry rolled his eyes. "You sound just like him."

She laughed and got off the bed. "So, now what?"

"You're the one who looks like she's in revenge mode," he said. "You tell me."

She grabbed a pair of heeled sandals and slipped them on. "Let's get out of here."

"Where?"

"I don't know. Let's get Ginny and Ron, and do something. Is the floo in your room connected?"

"No."

"All right, we'll go through the front door then. Just keep walking no matter what. Do not talk to either man. Agreed?"

Harry nodded, the feral look in her eyes scared him from doing anything else. She linked her arm through his and together they walked downstairs, Harry shooting a furtive glance in the study as they passed by.

"Oi!" Sirius called. "Where are you off to?"

"Keep walking," Hermione murmured.

"Hermione."

She ignored Remus, smiling at Harry when he opened the door. A moment later they were on the front step. By the time Remus opened the door, they were gone.

"I would not want to be you right now," Sirius said from behind his shoulder.

"Bugger off."

"Let's have another!" Fred shouted, everyone at the table cheering as another round of shots appeared as if by magic. If they had been at one of their usual haunts, that would have been the case, but instead they were at a Muggle bar in London, a place George had heard about from a friend. Hermione didn't care. After the day she had, she was ready to drown her cares away, matching Ron drink for drink in a game Harry had seen played out many times.

"Who passed out first the last time they did this?" Ginny cheered as Hermione slammed down her glass, adding a galleon to the small pile on the table. Ron followed a second later.

"Hermione," Harry said.

"She's out for revenge," Ginny kissed Harry's cheek.

"In more ways than one," he replied, wincing as their glasses were filled again.

"Shouldn't we slow down?" Ron asked. "I mean, some of us have to work tomorrow!"

"Oh, Ron" Hermione sniffed. "You sound like -"

"You?"

"Yes!" Hermione cried, eyes wide and a bit glassy. "I can be so annoying!"

Ron looked like he wanted to agree, then realized it was a trap, and drank his shot instead, tossing his galleon to the middle of the table. Holding up a finger for a temporary timeout, Hermione grabbed Fred's arm and pulled him to the dance floor.

"What gotten into you tonight, love?" he asked.

Hermione linked her hands behind Fred's neck. "Oh, you know. Fight a war, kill an evil wizard, search for lost parents, come home broke and alone, learn the man you've loved for years loves you, too, but apparently that makes him a controlling ass, but fuck it all, you still love him."

Fred nodded through most of her babbling, though the love parts of her rambling made him stumble. Hermione blamed it on her shoes and, using Fred's shoulder to support her balance, pulled them off. She tossed them in the general direction of their table.

"Are you in love, Hermione?"

"Sadly, yes." She tilted her head back to admire the flashing lights above them. They looked like stars. Red, blue, green, purple and yellow stars. Stars should be purple. Why weren't they? She wondered if she could make the stars purple. Remus probably knew a spell. He knew everything. That bastard.

"With whom? And if you don't say my name, I'll be heartbroken."

"Oh Fred." She leaned forward to kiss his cheek, the weight of her head suddenly too much so her peck was more of a head butt, but Fred was enjoying drunk Hermione too much to mind. "If only it were that simple. I am mated to another."

"Wait – *mated*? Like in werewolf?"

"So you've heard of it!" Her face was pure joy.

"It's a big deal, Hermione; not something to joke about."

"Tell me about it." She slumped against him, forcing Fred to tighten his grip on her waist so they remained upright. Yawning widely, she decided dancing wasn't as much fun as sitting, so she took Fred's hand and dragged him off the dance floor. He caught his twin's eye, who quickly pushed out Hermione's chair and helped her into it.

"Doing all right, pet?" George asked.

"Peachy keen jelly bean," Hermione snorted. She looked for another shot, but found a glass of water instead. A look around the table showed her why; Ron was passed out. "Yay!" she cried, pulling the pile of galleons to her. She counted out the others' share and slid the rest into her purse. Holding her water up in toast, she drank deeply before laying her head on the table and falling asleep.

"Work is going to suck tomorrow," Harry announced.

Remus was slouched in a chair at the kitchen table, an empty bottle of firewhiskey in front of him. He and Sirius had finished it about an hour ago, but it didn't make him feel better. If anything, it made him feel worse. Sirius did not have such problems, having fallen asleep in the study a few minutes ago. Their plan was to keep an eye on each fireplace for when Harry

and Hermione returned. Remus had no idea what she would do to him, but she hoped she'd do it quick so he could begin the grovel portion of his life. Judging by his actions tonight, he should be finished by her 30th birthday.

SLAM!

He jumped out of his chair, running to see Harry practically dragging Hermione through the front door.

"What happened?"

"Shots."

"She was shot?!"

"No, idiot. She *did* shots. A lot of 'em."

"It wasn't a lot," Hermione slurred, her arm slung around Harry's neck.

"It wasn't a little," Harry snickered. The two of them laughed, fully encased in the drunken state where everything was hilarious.

"How drunk are you?" Remus asked.

Harry yawned. "I'm not that bad. She's worse. Ron's worser."

"That's not a word." Hermione told him. She leaned against the wall to stop the house from spinning. "Ron's worstest."

Harry nodded in agreement. He joined Hermione against the wall. It wasn't a bad spot. Maybe they could sleep there. He nudged Hermione to ask, but she was busy staring at the floor. It seemed to be staying still, so that was a good thing, but she was missing her shoes. Weird. She looked up and caught the eye of the man in front of her. "Remus!" she cried.

"Hermione," he said cautiously.

"I'm mad at you, you know."

He nodded gravely.

"I'm going to yell at you later," she promised.

"All right."

Pushing herself away from the wall, she stumbled into his arms. "But now I'm tired. Can you take me to bed?"

"Ew." Harry risked leaving the safety of the wall and shuffled to his own room.

"I'm not talking about sex, Harry James Potter!"

"Yeah you are; you just said it," he laughed, his hand grasping the banister as he pulled himself upstairs. "Silencing charms!" he yelled before he slammed his bedroom door shut.

Hermione shook her head, an action she immediately regretted. It made the house spin again. Why was the house spinning? Sirius should fix that.

"Are you drunk?" she asked Remus. He smelled like alcohol. He looked terrible. Actually, he looked sad and pathetic, but still cute. Dammit.

"I tried. It didn't take." He swept her into his arms. She looped her arms around his neck as he walked up the stairs. "Who's room am I taking you to?"

"Mine," she pointed to it helpfully and almost fell out of his arms. He tightened his grip and nudged her door open. Setting her on her feet, he started to back out, stopping only when she grabbed a handful of his shirt. "Where are you going?"

"My room."

"Why? Don't you love me anymore?"

He moved forward, brushing her hair back from her flushed face and kissing her lightly on her forehead. "I love you very much, but I don't think you want me here right now."

"You're right, I don't!"

He nodded and let go.

"But, since you're here, you might as well stay." She turned away to take off her dress. Wearing only a pair of black silk knickers, she walked to her wardrobe, grabbed a shirt and put it on, shuffling into the bathroom. "I'm gonna brush my teeth!" she shouted in the unnaturally loud voice she tended to use after drinking too much. "If you want to sleep in my bed, you can."

Remus closed her door, but did not lock it, and stripped down to his boxers. He got into her bed. She crawled in a second later, placing her wand on the nightstand with a pointed look in his direction. She moved over until she was lying on his chest, one arm loosely around his waist. "I don't forgive you," she mumbled.

"I understand."

"We have to talk."

"We will," he promised as he ran his hands down her back. "I'm so, so sorry."

A soft snore was her response.

Chapter 11

Remus didn't get drunk, but he did indulge, which explained his pounding headache. He groaned and tried to roll over, but couldn't. He raised his hand to rub his eyes, but he couldn't do that, either.

What the hell?

"Oh, good. You're awake."

His eyes snapped open. He was in Hermione's room, in Hermione's bed, but he couldn't move.

"What -"

"Binding spell." Hermione left the chair where she had been sitting for the past hour, contemplating her next move. She ran her hand down Remus' face, tapping him on the nose with her index finger. "Temporary, of course."

His eyes narrowed. "You performed a binding spell on me?"

She smiled, sweetly. "It's horrible, isn't it; having all of your choices taken from you? It's almost, hmm, what's the word ... *emasculating*."

He tried to sit up. She continued to smile and shook her head. "I don't think so, *mate*. It's time you and I had a little conversation. We're going to establish some ground rules." She stretched, slowly, the hem of her T-shirt rising to show several inches of her flat stomach. "We're going to talk through what happened yesterday and reach an understanding like the two mature adults we are and if I feel you can follow them, and stop behaving like a sophomoric, condescending ass, I will let you go."

"In other words," she whispered, leaning forward to kiss him lightly on the lips, the tips of her hair brushing against his face. "Be good."

She walked to her desk, where she picked up a small bottle of blue liquid and a glass of water. Bringing both to the bed, she held them up, an eyebrow raised in question.

"Hangover potion?" Remus guessed.

She nodded.

"I'm fine," he told her.

"It will help with your headache."

"I don't -"

"Don't lie to me, Remus. I've already learned that you can tell when I'm lying to you." She gestured to the small pile of books on the floor next to her armchair. "With time, with *trust*, I'll be able to do the same."

"Where did you -?"

"Your room." She held the potion to his lips, smiling when he swallowed. "You said I was free to borrow what I wanted."

He drank the water next. His headache disappeared almost instantly. "Thank you."

"Of course. Taking care of each other is important part of this relationship. I learned that this morning, too." She climbed on the bed and sat cross-legged next to him, her wand slowly tracing shapes on his stomach.

"Hermione -"

She held up her finger and shook her head. "I'm going to talk now and you are going to listen. Understand?"

He nodded.

"First, I know you are sorry for what happened last night. I know that wasn't you but Moony reacting to a tense situation. However, what you refuse to acknowledge, Remus, is that you're Moony. You are the man and the wolf, and until you reconcile that fact, we are going to have problems because I am *not* going to be the little woman. I entered into this relationship with eyes wide open. I may not have understood all aspects of it, but I do know that if you expect me to bow down to you -"

"I would *never* -"

She laid her finger on his lips. "No talking," she reminded him. He sighed, nodding slightly. "Thank you. Now, where was I ... oh, yes. You and I are going to have to explain our age difference to a lot of people. They are going to look at you as a lecherous older man and me as a naive schoolgirl. We both know that's not true, but there will be times when others refuse to listen. I hope that when that happens, a certain someone *won't* think he must do the fighting for two, locking said girl in her room without her wand. It reinforces the stereotype - and pisses off the girl.

"Second, you claim to know me, therefore you know a move like that would never, *ever* sit well with me. Had you explained, Remus, that you felt threatened and needed a few minutes with Harry alone before asking me to join you, I would have understood." She looked thoughtful. "I would not have liked it," she admitted, "but I like to think I would have given you the benefit of the doubt."

She stood up and walked around her room, pacing as she often did when gathering her thoughts. Remus often did the same. He wanted to smile at the similarity, but not when she had that look on her face and her wand in her hand.

"My life ... things are a bit up-in-the-air right now, Remus. I don't know what my plans are and the last thing I considered doing was entering into a relationship at this time. I need to figure out what to do next, without your influence. So while I promise to have more patience with you and your mood swings as we navigate our bond, I need you to have patience with me as I explore my options. I do not need you to offer advice unless I ask. I understand that for several years my well-being was your top priority, but I'm an adult now and if we're going to do this, I need to know you understand that caring goes both ways."

She sat back on the bed, her face serious as she looked at him. "Fifty-fifty. That's the only way this is going to work."

He didn't respond, but raised his eyebrow in question. She wanted to smile, but nodded instead.

"I can do that," he told her.

"Can you really?"

"I will try," he acquiesced. "I am going to make mistakes. The closer we are to the full moon, before and after, the harder it will be to control myself if I feel you are being threatened, but I'll try."

She nodded. "If you promise to try, to listen to me when you are in alpha mode, I promise to give you the benefit of the doubt."

"Agreed."

She smiled and sat back, stretching her legs in front of her. The tips of her toes brushed against his shoulder.

"Are we finished?" he asked.

"For now."

"Are you going to let me go?"

She gave him a wicked smile. "Are you uncomfortable?" She moved her knees. Leaning over him, she gently rubbed his arms above his head, kneading his shoulders. He tried to concentrate on her touch and not the fact that her movements were making her breasts shift under her T-shirt, which was almost in his face. He could smell her. Her anger. Her frustration. Her forgiveness. Her arousal. Would he ever *not* want her?

"Remus?"

"What?"

"I asked if you were uncomfortable."

"Oh. No."

There was that smile again. He feared that smile.

"Well, that won't do."

Running her hands slowly down his body, she traced the scars on his arms and chest, leaning forward to kiss, to lick, to nibble each one, slowing her administrations when he groaned.

"Hermione."

"Hmm?"

"Will you let me go? Please? I need to touch you."

She kissed him, pulling back slightly when he tried to deepen it. "No."

Sliding back down his body, she gripped him through his boxers, encircling his length with her hand. "I didn't just read about werewolves this morning," she warned him before removing his boxers and taking him in her mouth.

"Holy shit!"

He couldn't do anything as she kissed, licked and sucked. He wanted to grab her head with his hands, thread his fingers through her hair and make her go deeper. He wanted to pull her away and slide inside her instead. He wanted to move his hips, to thrust, but he couldn't. All he could do was lie there and watch as she explored, being light when he wanted rough, hard when he wanted soft.

She was killing him. This is how he was going to die.

Hermione felt ... powerful. Yes, that was the word. She had the man she loved by the balls, literally, and loving every minute of his. She knew she was driving him crazy, she could feel his frustration, his desire, but she didn't care. She knew Remus. If she let him go, he would take over, driving her up again and again before he took for himself. She licked her way down his length, her hands lighting gripping his balls. She squeezed, gently, and ran her nails underneath, as she took him deep in her mouth, moving up and down slowly.

"I can't ... please ..."

She went faster, sucked harder. She could feel his muscles tense. Using her tongue, she licked the head. Remus roared, shouting her name, the sound echoing off the ceiling as she sucked him dry, backing off only when he trembled, whispering her name. Picking up her wand, she said the spell to release him, laughing when he reared up to take her in his arms. He ripped her shirt off, flipping her so their positions were reversed.

"I have to taste you." He pressed a bruising kiss to her lips. "I have to know how wet ..." He didn't finish the sentence, tearing off her panties as he moved down her body to take her in an open-mouth assault that made her grab his head and scream; the orgasm coming out of nowhere! She lay back, breathing harsh as she tried to slow the beating of her heart. Remus' head came up, eyes flashing, a determined look on his face.

"Again," he growled.

Hermione walked downstairs feeling better. She couldn't say the same for Sirius, who was sitting at the kitchen table looking rather pathetic. "How much did you drink last night?"

"Apparently not as much as you," he said forlornly. "I missed out."

Hermione blushed. She didn't indulge often, but it seemed every time she did, Sirius was there encouraging her to have another. "So this isn't a hangover pout but an I-miss-everything mope?"

He nodded sadly. She gave his shoulder a sympathetic pat before pulling the small cauldron they used for household expenses off the shelf, adding the galleons she earned last night.

"There were drinking games? And you won?"

She winked. "You would've been proud."

He groaned and laid his head on the table. "The next time your man is an ass, I'm taking your side."

She laughed. "Liar."

He shrugged, but kept his head on the table. "Speaking of Remus, is he still with us or did you murder him while I slept on an extremely uncomfortable couch? And if you did kill him, what cover story did you come up with?"

"You don't need to fear a return trip to Azkaban, Sirius," Hermione brought a plate of toast and two mugs of tea to the table. "Remus is alive and well. He's having a bit of a lie in this morning."

Sirius studied her closely. Deciding he liked what he saw, he toasted her silently with his tea. They sat companionably, looking up only when an owl tapped on the window, a letter clutched in his beak. Sirius lazily waved his wand to let him in, watching with amusement as he gave the letter to Hermione, accepting a bite of toast as a thank you. "Good news, love?"

"That depends. I'm apparently meeting Fred and George for lunch."

"Perhaps you made plans last night."

She thought back, but most of the evening was a blur. She was still fuming when she and Harry arrived at the Burrow, which prompted Ginny to contact her brothers, knowing they'd arrange something fun. Everything after that was a mix of colors – some of them alcohol, some of them stars. She remembers dancing ... with Fred. "Oh no."

"Hermione?"

"I've got get ready; you can have the rest of the toast!"

"What do you know?"

Fred opened his eyes wide, his face a picture of innocence. If it was any other wizard in the world, she might actually believe he was sincere. "I ask you to lunch and you accuse me of wrongdoing? Really, Hermione, I thought you had better manners than that."

"The lack of respect youngsters have for their elders these days is appalling," George added as he pulled out a chair for Hermione at a corner café in Diagon Alley.

Hermione took her seat with a huff. She knew the twins. When they had information, they'd share it when they were ready and not a moment before. She only wished she knew what they knew, which could be anything given how she tended to babble when drinking.

"Hungry, pet? They make great sandwiches here; extra meat if that's your thing," George studied the menu, a small smile on his lips.

"I'll take egg salad, thank you," she told the waitress, eyes narrowed as Fred and George placed their orders. Anyone who passed by their table would think it was nothing more than three friends playing catch up after several weeks apart. Hermione knew better; it was an ambush. "Out with it; what did I tell you last night?"

Fred's eyes sparkled as he leaned back in his chair. "I have no idea what you're talking about, love. We just wanted to talk with you about your future."

"Exactly. Mum isn't the only one wondering what your plans are now that school is no longer dragging you down."

Hermione sighed, feeling restless and frustrated. Every time she tried to focus on her future, that's what she felt. She had no idea what she was doing or what she wanted to do. "I don't know."

"Hmm. Waiting for inspiration to strike, perhaps?" George asked.

"Something like that."

He nodded, his expression thoughtful as he sipped his butterbeer.

"You know," Fred said. "You could work with us."

"For you?"

"Not for, pet; with," George clarified. "You know how much we admire that brain of yours. Don't you think it's time to put it to good use?"

Hermione snorted. "Sure."

"Why not?" Fred asked. "We're brilliant when it comes to ideas, but the execution isn't always easy. We could use someone like you."

"Sirius helps at times," George added.

"Really?"

"Yep; Remus, too."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Remus?"

"Surprising, isn't it? But you have to remember, he was a Marauder before he was a professor."

She did tend to forget that. She was aware of Remus' history at Hogwarts and his close friendship with James and Sirius, a friendship that led to them becoming Animagi so they could keep Remus company during the full moon, but it was hard to reconcile those stories with the man she knew. On the other hand, he was very much the mindset that if something was going to be done, it should be done right. That kind of attention to detail likely served Fred and George well.

"Still with us, love?" Fred asked.

"What would working with you entail?"

The twins' faces lit up. Both had prepared to have to talk her into their idea, but if she was giving in so easily, they could settle the business portion of their lunch and move on to more pleasing topics.

Hermione listened as they outlined some of their new ideas and the roadblocks they've encountered trying to bring them to light. Hermione could feel herself getting excited about the possibilities. She wished she had a quill and a parchment to jot down the thoughts running through her head.

"Stop by the store tomorrow and have a look at the lab. You can work there or at your place; your preference," George told her.

"We can sort out the details as needed," Fred added.

She nodded absently, her thoughts already on potions and spells. She couldn't wait to check her books. George looked at Fred who nodded slightly.

"Oh, and you forgot this last night," George took one of Hermione's sandals out of his robes and set it on the table.

Hermione vaguely remembered kicking it off when standing in shoes became too cumbersome. "You only rescued one?" she asked.

"That's right, George," Fred looked inquisitively at his brother. "Shouldn't there be two?"

"You are correct, brother mine," George smirked. "Every shoe has a mate."

Hermione looked up at the word mate, eyes narrowed.

"Worried about your footwear, love?" Fred asked.

She leaned forward, her eyes narrowed. "What do you know?"

He smiled. "Not nearly enough."

"Hello?" she called as she tripped through the kitchen fireplace, grazing her hip on the side of the kitchen table.

"In here!"

Rubbing her hip absently, she followed the shout to the study, finding Remus stretched out on the couch, wearing faded green trousers and a gray T-shirt, a book in his hands. A cup of tea and a half-eaten candy bar sat on the coffee table.

"You look relaxed," she told him.

He gave her a lazy grin and pushed himself up so he could recline on the arm of the sofa. "I can't imagine why."

She joined him, snuggling into Remus' side. She sighed as he ran his fingers through her hair; wishing life could be as simple as it was right now.

"How was lunch?"

"I kind of have a job. The twins asked me to freelance; help them tweak some of their ideas." She looked up at him. "I didn't know that was something you did."

He shrugged. "At times. It keeps the mind sharp."

"That's what I was thinking; something to keep me busy while I figure out the bigger picture."

"That makes sense."

There was more. He could tell by the way she sat, not completely relaxed. He wanted to ask questions, but considering the past 24 hours, exercising caution seemed the best course of action, so he waited.

"Fred and George know."

"They know what?"

"About us."

He waited for panic to set in, but it didn't. Interesting.

"Remus?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you have a reaction to that?"

"I suppose I'm curious as to how they found out, but given your level of intoxication last night, I assume loose lips played a role."

That's what Fred had told her. She'd never mentioned Remus' name during her tirade about love, but the word mate was a dead giveaway. He and George were able to figure it out rather quickly.

"That's it?" she had asked. "I tell you I'm happy with my choice and the conversation's over?"

"It is a bit of a letdown," Fred agreed, "but seeing as neither one of us want details about your love life, we're going to leave it at that."

"Although we were wondering who else knows besides us and, we assume, Sirius," George chimed in.

"Harry found out yesterday."

"Oh," Fred shook his head. "Suddenly the need to drink makes more sense."

"He's fine now."

"The key word being now," George said.

Hermione sat up to look at Remus. "I'm sorry."

He kissed her. "I'm not."

She studied him. He didn't look upset. "You're not?"

"People are going to find out, Hermione."

"I know that, but ..."

"But?"

"Why are you so calm?"

He chuckled. "It could be because we're further removed from the full moon, but I suspect it's because a certain witch who will hex me into next week if I don't start to let things go. She doesn't like it when I take on all the burdens of the world by myself."

She elbowed him in the side, laughing as he retaliated by wrestling her to the floor, his body taking the brunt of their fall from the couch before he moved to settle on top of her, one hand cushioning her head.

"I am sorry I wasn't there to take some of the attention off of you," he said, tracing her lips with his finger. "I have complete confidence that you handled them well."

The statement was similar to what Fred and George had said after lunch. Walking back to their store, both had promised to kill Remus if he ever hurt her; a threat Fred told her they were required to make given the appendages all men have.

"While we do mean it, we know you can handle things on your own."

"We're there for backup," George added.

"And help dispose of the body," Fred told her.

"So that's it?" she asked, the need for conversation growing less important as Remus slowly unbuttoned her shirt.

He nodded. "Truth be told, if there's a Weasley that knows, I'd rather it's Fred and George than Ginny."

"Ginny? Why?"

He shuddered. "Girl talk."

She slapped his shoulder. "Remus John Lupin, that is completely sexist!"

"I agree, but before you get up in arms, let me ask this. Does your friendship with Ginny mean you know things about Harry you wished you didn't?"

She opened her mouth to reply and then shut it. It was bad enough she knew what she knew; why make Remus suffer, too?

He smirked. "I thought so."

Chapter 12

"Can I keep secrets from you?"

Remus looked up from pile of parchment on his desk. Hermione was sitting in his armchair, a stack of books on the footstool. She was one a self-appointed werewolf expert binge, buying every book she could on the subject and then crosschecking everything she read with him. They've had several conversations during which he felt like her teacher again. This was especially uncomfortable when they were in bed, so he instituted a "No werewolf talk when we're naked" rule and she, thankfully, complied.

"Do you plan on keeping secrets?"

"I was just curious," she replied. "I understand that our connection means we can tell when the other one is lying, but what if there's something we don't want the other to know?" Getting up, she walked over to where he sat and crawled into his lap, snuggling until she was tucked underneath his chin, her arms around his waist, his around hers.

"What don't you want me to know?" he probed.

"Nothing bad, but let's say I bought you something great for your birthday -"

"You don't have to get me anything for my birthday," he interrupted.

She glared at him. "Of course I'd buy you a present on your birthday, but that's not the point. The point is would you know I bought you a present? Would you know what it is?"

He wasn't sure how to answer. It wasn't as if he set out to catch her in a lie; he just knew when they were talking if anything she told him was less than the truth. She didn't do it often, but when she did, it was usually to protect him, to not burden him with the truth. In that regard, they were a perfect match. "I'm pretty sure present-related secrets are safe. But you probably shouldn't tell Sirius if you really want it to be a surprise."

She laughed. Almost two weeks have passed since the two of them were together for the first time and both could feel their bond strengthening every day. As such, she wanted to know more about what Remus experienced as a werewolf. She knew he wished she'd let him continue to deal with things the way he had, but she was convinced if he could reconcile himself to his lycanthropy, the transformations wouldn't be so draining – physically and emotionally.

Unfortunately, the negative views of werewolves in the wizarding world meant there weren't many books for her to prove her hypothesis. A few trips to Muggle bookstores resulted in more titles, though when she'd double-check the information with Remus, the Muggle texts were wrong more often than not.

"Muggles have a strange fascination with werewolves," Sirius flipped through a paperback romance featuring a partially-dressed woman in the arms of a werewolf.

"Vampires, too," Harry added. He hoped Sirius wouldn't find out that the book was Ginny's.

"If you do another late-night reading the next full moon, can I request this book?" Sirius asked as he skimmed a chapter.

Hermione snatched it from his hands.

"Why am I eating more meat?"

Remus opened his eyes at the question, the shampoo temporarily blinding him as he stuck his head back under the shower. "What?"

"Meat!" she yelled so he could hear her over the water. "I had four pieces of bacon at breakfast. I don't even like bacon."

"Hermione," he groaned. "I'm naked."

"I'm not," she replied. "Therefore, I'm not breaking your silly rule."

He opened the glass door and, ignoring her screech of protest, grabbed her arm and pulled her inside. The water quickly plastered her shorts and T-shirt to her body.

"First, it's wrong not to like bacon," he said as he removed the wet shirt. "Second, I know you had four pieces because you took the last one." Her bra came off next.

"But why?" she asked. "I'm not going to become a werewolf. And you weren't a werewolf when you bit me, so it's not like I have Bill's craving for rare meat."

He knelt down to slide off her shorts and knickers next, then decided to stay down there for a few minutes to see if he could change the subject, but despite her moans and the grip she had on his shoulders – he loved feeling her nails score his skin – he knew it was only a temporary distraction.

He kissed his way back up her body and nuzzled her neck, breathing in her scent. It never failed to center him, calm him. He was addicted to it, to her. "First, I marked you; I did not bite you." He framed her face with his hands, kissing her lightly. "I told you you'll have some traits."

"Right. I'll likely feel anxious around the full moon, restless, temperamental," she recited. "But you said nothing about carnivorous cravings."

His smile was indulgent. She loved it when he smiled. He's smiled more in the past few weeks than in all the years she's known him. If possible, he looked younger. He still had the scars on his face, of course, but the rest of him didn't look so strained. His color was good, his eyes were brighter and he walked taller, as if a weight had been taken off his shoulders.

"Add meat cravings to the list of werewolf mate facts I didn't know," he told her. "You should write a book."

She laughed. "Sure. I'll call it 'Why Vegetarians Shouldn't Love Werewolves.'"

His heart tripped on the word 'love,' but he didn't ask her to clarify. She had yet to say she loved him and he wasn't going to push her to do so. Instead, he ran his hands down her back, cupped her bottom and lifted until she was in his arms. "Sounds like a bestseller to me."

"I think I'm ready to tell Ron."

Remus set aside his book. They were in the study, both of them wasting away a rainy afternoon reading. He was sitting at one end of the couch while she stretched the length, her feet in his lap.

"Really?"

"I know Harry feels bad knowing when Ron doesn't and ... well, I've never kept anything big like his from him for this long. He's my best friend."

"He's also your ex-boyfriend," Remus pointed out.

"I don't think we were together long enough to establish that kind of terminology, but others do, so whatever," she shrugged. "The point is, he's one of my best friends and I'm forcing his other best friend to keep something from him. The longer I put it off, the bigger it will seem when I finally tell him."

Remus nodded even though he'd be perfectly content if they never told Ron. It wasn't that he disliked Ron, he just ... No, Ron dated Hermione at a time when not being with her was killing him. He hated Ron. "Do you want me to be there?" he asked, part of him hoping she'd say no.

"I think you should be."

He sighed. If this was a test to see if he could remain calm ... He got up.

"Where are you going?" Hermione asked.

"I need to buy more chocolate."

"It's amazing, Hermione; I wish you'd change your mind and accept Kingsley's offer."

Hermione shook her head, smiling as Ron regaled her with stories about auror training. Some he'd already told her, several times, but she loved his enthusiasm. Harry was all about the big

picture – catch the bad wizards and make the world a better place. Ron enjoyed the perks that came with their responsibilities. Being called Mr. Weasley by a senior member of the Ministry was one he especially loved.

"Oh! Mum wanted me to tell you that Ginny got permission to come home for your birthday dinner."

"Great! She's not too thrilled with my decision not to go back to Hogwarts, so I'm glad she won't miss that, too."

"You know she's going to want us to go out the night before?"

"I do."

"And you know I'll need to challenge you to another drinking game?"

She smirked. "And you know I'll win again, right?"

He grinned and took another cookie, the plate she had placed on the table nearly empty as they waited for Remus to come to the kitchen. Well, she was waiting. Ron just thought he was there for a chat. Hermione opened her mouth to just start talking when she heard Remus' footsteps.

"Sorry," he took a seat in the chair next to hers.

"Hey, Remus," Ron said around a mouthful of cookies. Remus nodded.

"Um, so Ron, there was actually a reason I wanted you to stop by," Hermione started.

"Yeah?"

"Yes. Um, there's something I've wanted to tell you."

"What?"

She put her hands on the table, but they were shaking, so she set them in her lap. "Well, you know how you know a person, for a long time, and you think of them one way, but then one day it's different, and suddenly it's like you're seeing them, *really* seeing them, for the first time?"

He looked at her blankly. "Huh?"

"OK," she tried again. "There's someone in my life very special to me and I am special to him, and so we have decided to start a, well, special relationship together and ..." She gripped Remus' hand under the table and looked at him for help. He shrugged.

"Hermione," Ron spoke slowly, "if you are trying to tell me that you and Harry are looking at each other differently, I need to kill him for hurting my sister."

"No! It's not Harry."

Ron look relieved, but only for a second. "Is it Fred?" He made a face. "Really, Hermione, you could do a lot better than him. George, too."

"No!"

"Is it Sirius? Because I've gotta tell you, Hermione, *that* would be weird."

Hermione closed her eyes and tugged on Remus' hand, bringing it up to the table. Peeking, she saw Ron look at their clasped hands, look at Remus, look at her, and look at the hands again. She felt Remus' grip tighten in hers.

"Bloody hell!" Ron pushed back from the table. His chair fell to the floor with a crash. Remus tensed and Hermione prepared herself for shouting, but instead Ron went to the pantry, took out a tin of crackers, opened it, and withdrew a candy bar.

"That's your response?" she asked. "You're going to eat a bloody chocolate bar?"

He took a large bite, chewing slowly. Swallowing, he shrugged. "I don't really know what you want me to say. Is this strange? Yeah, a little. He's a lot older than us and he used to be our teacher, but he's not anymore and, well, you were never going to end up with anyone our age anyway."

"What?"

"You're too smart. It's intimidating. I didn't think you'd go higher than 10 years older, but it's your life, not mine." He took another bite, realized that the candy he was eating was Remus' and held out what was left. "Chocolate?"

Remus shook his head, his posture relaxing. This was going better than he imagined, Ron's "strange" comment aside.

"Um, that's good. I guess," Hermione said uncertainly.

"Is it? You both look like you expected me to explode or something." He paused and studied Hermione's face. She looked guilty. "You were, weren't you? You expected me to have a fit about this!"

"Maybe a little," she admitted.

"Bloody hell! You have a few moments growing up when your temper gets the best of you and you're labeled the hot-tempered one forever! I guarantee Harry will *not* take the news as well as I did! I mean, he'll get over it, he's Harry, but you two better have a good speech prepared before you ..." He broke off, noting that Hermione still looked guilty. "You already told him, didn't you?"

"If it helps," Remus interjected, "he found out by accident and he did yell. A lot."

Ron considered that. "Yeah, it helps. Thanks." He popped the last piece of chocolate in his mouth. "You didn't tell Ginny yet, did you? Because I was your best friend way before she was and if my little sister finds out secrets before me, I'm going to -"

"She doesn't know," Hermione interrupted.

"Good."

"Um ... " She looked down at the table. "But Fred and George do."

"WHAT?!?"

"It was an accident! I said something about mating when we were at the club and Fred realized we only know one werewolf and -"

"Wait, wait, wait! Mating? As in you are his mate? Are you serious?"

Hermione nodded. Ron glared at Remus. "That's serious, Hermione. Once you go through with it, there's no going back and -" he broke off, finally noticing the scar on Hermione's shoulder. "Well, I guess there's no need to finish talking, huh?"

Hermione let go of Remus' hand to grab Ron's. "Ron, please. He didn't have a choice, but I did and I chose this. I really did."

Ron looked at Remus. "Do you love her?"

He nodded. "I do."

He didn't look convinced. "Really? Because she can be crazy, especially when she's mad."

"I've learned."

"You're going to be learning a lot, mate. Trust me."

Hermione smiled. She could ignore the crazy comment – this time. "Are you really all right with this?"

He shrugged. "I'm not fantastic, but give me some time and I'll be OK. The important thing is you're happy, right?"

She nodded.

"And you love him, too?"

She looked at Remus. He never said anything, but she knew he was anxious to hear her say the words. "I do. I love you, Remus Lupin."

He stood up, pulling her up too, and kissed her. Those three words ... he had no idea how much hearing them would feel him with such peace. It was real. What they had was real. He loved her. She loved him, wolf and all. Was there ever a man as lucky as him?

"Guys! Guys! I'm still trying to get used to this."

Remus pulled away. "There's chocolate in the silverware drawer," he told the redhead before taking Hermione into his arms again.

Averting his gaze, Ron dug around the back of the drawer and found a small bag of individual candies. Opening it up, he popped a few in his mouth. "I've got one best friend dating my sister, the other dating my old professor. I'm glad I don't have a third best friend going after my mum."

Chapter 13

Hermione studied the vials before her. Each one held a single serving of Time Flies, one of the twins' newest creations that, according to them, could make time speed up for anyone who ingests it. George claimed it could make the most boring of events pass in a flash, but he stopped touting the benefits it would have for Hogwarts students after Hermione lectured him on the importance of education.

"This is why she's not in charge of marketing," he whispered to Fred.

Time Flies took months to create, with some assistance from both Remus and Sirius. After extensive testing, the twins were ready to roll it out except for one small problem.

"It's beyond foul," Fred said.

"Polyjuice foul?" Hermione had asked.

"Worse." George filled a tiny dropper and handed it over.

She swallowed and promptly spit it out. It took several mouth rinses and a shot of firewhiskey – thank you, Fred – to finally get the taste out of her mouth. "Why couldn't Remus and Sirius make it taste better?"

"They tried; they couldn't," George told her. "You know how awful Wolfsbane tastes, right?"

Hermione nodded.

"It's the same thing," George continued. "Any attempt to sweeten this potion lessens the affects, so your boyfriend suffers through it."

"That's fine for him, but we can't expect customers to buy something that tastes like my cooking," Fred added.

"If you can find a way to make it taste better without altering the effects of the potion, you'll be our favorite person," George said.

"You told me I was your favorite person last week when I came up with the name Time Flies," she reminded him.

"We'll have a plaque made," he promised. "Not only will it name you Employee of the Month, but we'll have the plaque named after you, too."

That was weeks ago. She spent several days researching the potion's ingredients, cross-referencing them with flavorful ingredients. She even took a side trip to Hogwarts to talk with Professor Slughorn. Being back in the school was weird. She waited to feel a longing for the school, classes, library – the routine – but it never came. She was slightly disappointed until Remus pointed out that now she knows not going back was the right decision.

"Any luck?" Remus asked from his perch on the stool at the end of the table. She had been in the twins' workspace since 9 a.m., trying different concoctions. When she first took on the job, it was a puzzle. Now it was a quest. A quest, judging by the crazed look she had in her eyes, that wasn't going terribly well.

"Maybe" She scribbled something on a piece of parchment. "These need to sit for 24 hours and then we'll see."

She took a step back and stretched, smiling at Remus. He'd arrived an hour ago from a meeting at the Ministry. She knew Kingsley had given up on Remus continuing his work with the aurors, but the newest Minister of Magic had a stubborn streak that rivaled Remus'. Judging by the thoughtful look on his face, their latest conversation had possibilities. "So?" she asked.

"So what?"

She walked until she was standing in front of him, his legs on either side of her. Straightening his tie, she smiled at him. "What's the latest at the Ministry?"

He shrugged. "Politics. Too much talk, not enough action."

"And Kingsley wants your help?"

What he wanted was to repeal the anti-werewolf legislation that had made life for him and other werewolves beyond difficult, and he wanted Remus' help creating new laws. While Remus supported the idea and the benefits it would have for others like him, he wasn't comfortable with being the face of the movement, something he knew Hermione couldn't understand.

He was perfectly aware that he was a werewolf, but when he was younger, it helped him control the worst of his violent outbursts if he thought of the monster, of Moony, as a separate entity. It kept him sane until he had friends who understood. To give that up now ... Maybe Hermione was right. Maybe it would make his life easier, but what if she was wrong? With her, he had everything he ever wanted. Was it wrong to want to do everything he could to keep it that way?

He tucked a piece of hair that had fallen out of her bun behind her ear, leaning down to kiss the side of her neck, smiling as she sighed and leaned closer. It was amazing how something so small, so simple, never failed to center him.

"He has some ideas and I'm mulling it over," he replied.

"Do you need a sounding board?" she asked.

"Eventually."

She nodded. She wanted to press, to make him talk to her now, but the other part of her, the part that was learning what it meant to be half a couple, understood he needed to wrap his

head around the conversation before he shared it with her. "Whenever you're ready, you know where to find me."

She tidied up her workspace, leaving a note for Fred and George not to touching anything. She checked the time to make sure they weren't running late. Her birthday dinner at the Burrow wasn't until tomorrow, but Ginny got back from Hogwarts tonight and, like Ron said, she wanted everyone to go out.

"When you say 'go out,' do you mean leave the house?" Remus had asked, looking rather uncomfortable with the idea.

"Going out usually means transporting oneself out of their place of residence," she replied.

"What's the big deal?" Harry had asked. "You and Sirius go to pubs all the time."

"Pubs," Remus stressed. "Where one can sit, have a drink and a conversation without having to scream to be heard."

"He's not a fan of the noise, love," Sirius had whispered to Hermione later. "It's loud, it's crowded. This close to the full moon, his senses are already on overdrive. Going to a place Ginny recommends ..."

He didn't finish his sentence, but he didn't have to. Unbeknownst to Remus, Hermione had owed Ginny to arrange a private gathering of music and alcohol at Grimmauld Place instead; partly to be a good mate, but also to test if she could keep a secret from Remus.

So far, so good.

"Why are you smiling like that?"

Not so good.

"I was thinking about last night."

He cocked his head and studied her. Part of him knew she wasn't being completely truthful, but he also got the sense that what she was keeping from him wasn't that big of a deal and the best thing to do would let it go. He was already apprehensive about the night ahead; no need to add to it. "It was enjoyable," he agreed, smiling as her eyes narrowed.

"Enjoyable?" she repeated. "If I remember correctly, your exact words were 'You are incredible,' mixed in with some prayers to a higher being and a little bit of begging."

"Feeling smug, are you?"

She grinned. "Darling, it's not like you're expected to be incredible every single time. I mean, a man of your age does need to rest every now and then."

That did it. He launched off the stool, tackling her against the wall, his arms gripping her arms as he hoisted her up until they were eye level. "You don't want to start something you can't finish," he threatened softly.

"Where's the fun in that?"

She wrenched out of his grasp, grabbed his head and kissed him, locking her ankles behind his waist. He sank his fingers into her hair and tangled his tongue with hers. He would never get enough of her, could never get enough of her. It was insane how much he ached for her after only a few hours apart. He didn't know how he went so long with taking her, claiming her. To think of the time he denied himself ... never again. She was his. She would always be his.

"I love you," he whispered fiercely.

"I love you," she replied breathlessly.

She opened for him, giving him complete access as his hands explored her body, the strength of his keeping hers pinned against the wall as his hands palmed her breasts, fingers pinching her nipples until she moaned.

"REMUS JOHN LUPIN!"

He jumped away from Hermione, grabbing her to keep her from falling, before turning to face the person that had screeched: Molly Weasley. The short, round woman stood in the doorway, hands on her hips. Her sons stood behind her, looking apologetic.

"We tried to stop her and –"

Molly marched toward them, her face as red as her hair. "How dare you take advantage of her?!"

"Molly," Remus started.

"And you!" she cried, turning to the twins. "You knew about this?"

"Mum, we –"

Molly reached out and grabbed Hermione, pulling her from Remus' grasp. The change in him was immediate. That move transformed the man from embarrassed to angry, placating to incensed. "Let go of her now." His voice was low, but the threat was there. Molly reacted automatically, dropping Hermione's hand, her mouth dropping open as the girl she considered a daughter rushed to Remus' side and wrapped her arms around him.

"Mrs. Weasley, please," she started.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Hermione?" the woman asked. "What can you possibly say to explain this? You are a smart girl! Why would you throw away your future on _"

"STOP IT!" Hermione screamed. "I did not throw my life away; I found it! This is the man I love, the man I will spend the rest of my life with – and he's the man that saved your son from being killed by Death Eaters. You will not insult him!"

She had the decency to blush at that, but her face remained disapproving and disappointed. Remus was silent, all of him focused on not losing control of the situation. He wanted to whisk Hermione away, to hide her. The need to protect his mate was killing him. His hands shook with the effort it took to stay in that room.

"Molly." His jaw clenched as he struggled to remain calm. "I am sorry you had to find out like this, but it's true. I love Hermione. She loves me."

"She's 18, Remus! She doesn't know what love is."

"Mum - "

"You will stay out of this, boys!"

Hermione could feel Remus' frustration, his anger. He was embarrassed for her. Scared for her. Hurt for her. Squeezing his hand, she let go to undo the top three buttons of her shirt, pulling it slightly off her shoulder so Molly could see her scar.

The older woman gasped.

"I did not want to tell you this way," Hermione told her sadly. "I wanted to come to you like a daughter, to find the words that would prove to you how happy I am."

"Hermione - "

"No," she interrupted. "I know what you are going to say. Before you do, you need to know I chose this. *I* did it, not him. He was willing to spend the rest of his life suffering, letting the werewolf destroy the man, so I could love what he calls a normal life. It was killing him! You saw him!"

The older witch was quiet. Letting go of Remus, Hermione approached Molly. She took her hands and squeezed, the gesture begging the woman to understand. "He wasn't going to tell me," she said. "I figured it out and I confronted him. I told him I wanted him. I made the first move. He didn't have a choice. He never did. He's mine. Always."

Molly's eyes filled with tears, her hands shaking as she gripped Hermione's.

"I don't know how my mum would react," Hermione told her. "I'm guessing she'd be shocked, confused. We'd yell. We'd cry. But she would come around eventually, I know that. She couldn't see how happy he makes me and not love him for it."

"Please," she whispered desperately, her voice so soft only Molly could hear. "Please don't be mad. Please try to understand and be happy for me." Her eyes filled with tears. "Please don't hate me. I don't want to lose another mother."

That did it. The three men watched, amazed, as Molly burst into tears and gathered Hermione in her arms, swaying side to side. "My girl, my girl," she whispered soothingly.

Remus didn't know what to do. The threat was gone. It disappeared the moment Molly hugged Hermione, but this ... Watching the two women weep, he almost wished that the

redhead would start yelling again. He knew how to react to that. He looked at Fred and George for guidance. The pair just shook their heads, flabbergasted.

"Welcome to the family, mate," Fred said.

Chapter 14

"You are amazing," he announced. She looked up from where she was sitting on the edge of her bed, slipping on a pair of low-heeled black sandals, and smiled.

"So I keep telling you," she replied with a wink.

He laughed, tackling her, ignoring her squeals of protest as he kissed her, pouring all of his emotions from the last few hours into the press of his lips against hers. Molly had hugged him before she left the twins' store; a fierce pull of him against her that was both hopeful – "You take care of her," she had commanded – and ominous – "or you'll have to deal with me."

Fred and George had snickered, the image of their mother making the werewolf quiver in fear making them temporarily forget her anger with them at keeping the relationship a secret. Everyone breathed easier when she left for home, though tomorrow night's dinner could be awkward.

"What will your dad say?" Remus had asked, not wanting to picture the always-cheerful Arthur Weasley as anything but, well, happy.

"Oh, you know dad," George had said.

He did and he knew the man loved Hermione as much as he loved Ginny, a concern he shared with Hermione when they got home. She was patient – to a point.

"Remus, I'm not clairvoyant. I can't tell you what he'll do," she exclaimed.

"I just don't want to make things uncomfortable for you. I know how much the Weasleys mean to you and if I was responsible for causing a rift between you - "

She had no choice, at least that's what she told herself when she jumped off his bed and into his arms, tackling him to the floor, where she tore his clothes off to change the subject. She left him there, smiling and slightly out of breath, and went to her room to get ready for the night ahead.

"Remus," she said now, pulling away from him. "We can't."

He pressed his lips to her collarbone. "We can. We have."

"Everyone will be here soon."

"So tell them we'll meet them later," he replied, intrigued with the tiny row of buttons on the front of her dress. A flick of his fingers and two popped open, leaving more of her gorgeous skin on display.

"You'll see Ginny tonight," he murmured, his words somewhat muffled as he licked above the swell of her breast.

"Hmm?"

He chuckled. "I want to make sure you have something worthy to tell her." He slid off the bed until he was knelt on the floor. He ran his hands down her legs and grasped her ankles. Tugging gently, he pulled until her legs were over his shoulders, his mouth directly where he wanted to be. "Don't try to tell me you don't want me," he whispered. "I can smell you."

She bit her lip, arching as he slid one finger inside her knickers, lightly exploring her wet heat as he rested his head on her thigh. Why was she fighting this? Being with him, connected to him, made her feel whole. The horrors of the war, the nightmares that followed, the uncertainty of the future – all of that disappeared when she was with him. He made her believe that everything would be all right.

"Hermione?" he questioned, one large hand curving underneath her knickers to slowly slide them down her legs.

She let out her breath. "Hurry," she urged.

He laughed quietly, his tongue diving in to taste her. "No."

"You minx!"

Hermione had just finished setting her dress to rights when Ginny burst in to her room, her blue eyes flashing in accusation. Harry and Ron followed, Harry looking exasperated and Ron ... well, he was trying not to look anywhere for fear of seeing something he didn't want to see.

"Ginny!" Hermione rushed forward to grab her friend in a hug, but the redhead wasn't having it and pushed her away.

"You will not distract me!" she shouted. "I had to find out from my mother, *my mother*, that you have been shagging Remus Lupin? Me, the one who had to listen to all your frustrated sexual fantasies about the oh-so-quiet professor, had to learn he's your freaking mate from a woman who -"

"You've had fantasies about me?" Remus walked out of Hermione's bathroom, an arrogant smile on his face. "Have we acted on any of them?"

"Bloody hell," Ron groaned.

"Seriously, Remus," Harry added, his face turning red. "There's only so much I can take."

Turning, Ginny pushed her boyfriend and her brother out of the door. "Out! I need to talk to Hermione alone! That means you, too, *professor*."

Remus grinned and pulled Hermione to him, kissing her deeply, before following the boys out the door. Ginny watched the whole thing with wide eyes.

"That's hot," she whispered as he closed the door. Running to Hermione's bed, she jumped on it and sat, legs crossed and back straight, looking very much like a young child on Christmas morning. "OK, girlfriend. Spill it."

Hermione laughed and jumped on the bed, too, bringing her knees to her chest as she grinned at her friend.

"Judging by the idiotic expression on your face and the mark on your neck, you are beyond thrilled with this turn of events," Ginny remarked.

Hermione nodded.

"Good. Let's skip all the mushy nonsense and get to the good stuff. What is he like in bed?"

"Amazing."

Ginny clapped her hands. "I knew it! It's always the quiet ones! Is he all serious and methodical, or does he let the wolf out to play and pounce?"

"Both," Hermione answered smugly.

Ginny leaned over to smack Hermione on the arm. "You bitch!" Flouncing back on Hermione's bed, she stared dreamily into space for a moment.

"Stop trying to picture it!" Hermione cried.

"I can't help it! This is the man you have harbored secret feelings for since you were 13 and the fact that he had them, too ... it's better than any romance book." She sat up again. "Give me details."

Hermione laughed. "No."

"Come on!" she cried. "I tell you everything!"

"And I never ask! What does that tell you?"

"That until a few weeks ago, you had nothing to contribute to the conversation. Come on, Granger; spill. Who made the first move?"

"I did."

Ginny laughed. "I love it! Did he try to talk you out of it?"

"Again and again."

"Oh, Remus," she shook her head. "He never stood a chance, did he?"

"You do know they're talking about you?" Sirius asked Remus, who was leaning against the study wall, pretending to watch the twins demonstrate their newest product to Harry and Ron, while secretly wondering what Hermione was telling Ginny.

"I'm well aware," he replied.

Studying his friend, Sirius took in his relaxed features and shit-eating grin. "You bastard," he said admiringly. "You made sure to leave her all happy to get a good review, didn't you?"

Remus raised his glass of firewhiskey in a toast. "There's a reason why I'm the smart one."

Clinking glasses, the two friends drank; Remus in effort to get in a relaxed state of mind before heading out for the night, Sirius because ... well, there wasn't much else he did these days. He occasionally toyed with the idea of seeking a woman's company, but he wasn't interested in anything beyond one night's pleasure, that was, until he'd come across Hermione and Remus. They were so fucking cute together, so *right*. Maybe his friend was on to something. Maybe tying yourself to one person for the rest of your life wasn't the death sentence he always imagined it to be.

"So, all-knowing and wise one, when are you going to make an honest woman of her?" Sirius smirked as Remus choked on his drink.

"What?" he gasped.

"Marriage," Sirius said. "You don't honestly believe Molly Weasley is going to be satisfied with the two of you living in sin?"

"We're not – she's my mate, Sirius. I can't breathe without her."

"That's nice," he replied. "I'd definitely include that line in your proposal."

Remus shook his head. Marriage? He knew it would happen ... eventually. They were already committed to each other, so the question and the ring and the ceremony – it was just a formality, right? No big deal.

So why were his hands shaking?

"Moony, relax," Sirius pounded his friend's back in a somewhat comforting manner. "This isn't something you need to do today."

"Well, we can't anyway," Remus replied. "It's illegal for werewolves to marry witches."

Sirius shook his head. "Don't even try to use that as an excuse. The laws are changing. If you would stop being so stubborn and agree to help Kingsley, you could have your ring on Hermione's finger by Christmas."

Remus opened his mouth to respond, but he heard the click of Hermione's door openings, followed by two girls giggling as they made their way downstairs. "We'll talk later, Padfoot."

"Agreed. If Ginny Weasley gets to know the details of your sex life, I want some dirt on Hermione, too. It's only fair."

Remus glared at him. "I'm not talking to you about Hermione."

Sirius finished his drink. "We'll see."

"I love you," he whispered, his breath warm in her ear as he spooned her from behind, one arm tight around her waist. It was almost three in the morning and they had just stumbled into bed. Remus took the news of their night in with newfound enthusiasm for every drinking game the twins could come up with, demonstrating that while Sirius was often the one nursing a drink, Remus was the one who could hold his liquor - and more.

"Do you think Sirius will be OK on the floor?" She mumbled, the fuzziness in her brain slowly clearing thanks to the potion Remus made her drink after he shagged her against the wall, her lack of inhibitions pushing him to drive her higher and harder. She knew there would be bruises in the morning. She also knew he would love that.

She refused to admit that she loved it, too.

"He has George to keep him company if he wakes up," Remus replied.

"Mmmpf."

He kissed her bare shoulder and tried to sleep, but the full moon was only a few days away. Sleep wouldn't come easy.

"Sweetheart?" he whispered.

"Hmm?"

"What fantasies have you had about me?"

She giggled and snuggled deeper in his arms. "Oh, the usual schoolgirl/professor kind of thing."

"Really?" He couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice.

"Mmm-hmm. When you used to lean against your desk during a lecture, all I wanted to do was climb on to your lap and kiss you until you lost that serious expression," she giggled again, the light sound ending on a hiccup. She rolled over to face him, rubbing her nose against his. "Funny, isn't it? You knew I was yours back then, but only saw me as someone to protect and all I wanted to do was ravish you."

He slid his hands down to cup her ass, pulling her firmly into him, smiling at her gasp as he slid inside her. Shifting to keep his movements slow, shallow, he bent his head down to nibble on her neck. She panted softly, her breath warm against his skin.

"I can never get enough of you," she confessed.

He moved so she was on her back, her legs around her waist. Raising himself up on his forearms, he started to move a little faster, a little harder. He pressed his forehead against hers, their eyes locked. He saw the change in her, from drowsy to excited, excited to eager. She gripped her shoulders, her breaths coming faster. "Hermione," he groaned. "Sweetheart, please."

She knew he was barely holding on, waiting for her to find her pleasure before he'd let go. She was close, so close, but she wasn't ready to let go. He looked amazing like this. Strong. Intense.

Hers.

"I love you, Remus Lupin," she whispered fiercely against his lips.

He slid one hand between their bodies to touch her, his fingers caressing the bundle of nerves. She sucked in her breath. She was so close.

"Come with me," she begged just before the coil snapped and she plunged into the pleasure, Remus following on a shout, his lips locked on his mark, where he nibbled and kissed until he could breathe again.

She was amazing. So brave. So smart. So incredibly sexy.

His.

Chapter 15

He felt like a teenager – and not in a good way.

As they walked to the Burrow, a clutch of flowers in his hand, Remus wished desperately to be anywhere else. He looked toward the love of his life and his best friend for sympathy, but they were too busy arguing. Still.

"I said I was sorry, Sirius! What else do you want me to do?"

"I want you to promise that it will never happen again!"

She stopped walking, forcing Remus to stop, too, as she was holding his hand that didn't have flowers. "It was a piece of bacon!"

"It was the last piece of bacon -- and I called it!"

"You can't call bacon!"

"Can, too," Sirius grumbled.

"That is the dumbest thing I ever heard of!"

"I think you suddenly like bacon is the dumbest thing I ever heard of. What were you thinking, Remus? Have you noticed how much she eats now?"

Hermione gasped. "Are you calling me fat?"

"No. I'm just pointing out that ever since you got that little love bite, you're appetite has increased. In more ways than one, I might add." He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"Sirius Orion Black, I will kill you." She dropped Remus' hand and advanced on the dark-haired wizard with a wicked gleam in her eyes.

"Hey!" Remus forced himself out of his woes and snagged Hermione by the waist. "Sirius, I asked you not to bait her around the full moon, especially her first full moon. She's not used to the changes yet and is a little off."

"Are you calling me crazy?!"

"No, sweetheart. You are as patient and calm as you've always been." He kissed the top of her head.

"Laying it on a bit thick, aren't you?" Sirius muttered.

"Enough! We are almost at the Burrow and if you don't mind, I would like to focus on the fact that there will be several people there who just learned about Hermione and I, and may

possibly want to kill me, so you'll understand that I don't have time to referee your childish behavior."

He pointed a finger at Sirius. "You will stop talking about bacon, Padfoot, and have empathy for Hermione. And you, my love, will realize that change is not something Sirius handles well, so please have patience."

Grabbing the flowers he'd dropped on the ground, he muttered a curse to make them new again and stomped to the front door, waiting for Sirius and Hermione to join him before knocking.

"What got into him?" Sirius asked.

"Full moon," Hermione replied.

Taking Hermione's hand, Sirius helped her navigate the brick pathway, as she insisted on wearing heels, telling herself the extra inches would give her confidence. "He needs to find a new excuse."

Molly accepted the flowers with a smile. She gave Remus a quick hug. He watched as she did the same with Sirius.

Did she hug him longer?

Hermione swooped in for her hug and kiss, laughing as Molly called her beautiful. Arm-in-arm, the two walked back to the kitchen, leaving Remus to continue to the backyard alone.

"You know everyone here, Moony," Sirius told him. "It's the Order."

"I know."

"We've trusted each other with our lives."

"That was before I shagged their Golden Girl."

Sirius nodded sagely. "I told you to propose," he reminded him as they stepped outside.

Arthur Weasley was standing near the cluster of picnic tables, talking with Kingsbury Shacklebolt, Minerva McGonagall, and his oldest sons, Bill and Charlie. He looked up as Remus and Sirius walked outside, his smile of welcome fading slightly when he made eye contact with Remus.

"Are you going to walk into the fire?" Sirius asked.

"You don't have to be so damn cheery about this," Remus grumbled.

"Sure I do. For once, I'm the good guy. How often does that happen?"

Remus didn't respond, walking straight to the group of adults who, until recently, he considered friends. Judging by the look McGonagall had on her face, he didn't think his former professor would call him the same. Kingsley looked thoughtful. Bill and Charlie were almost gleeful.

"Good evening everyone. Arthur."

"Remus," he replied. "Where's my girl?"

"My -" he swallowed his automatic response whenever someone tried to lay claim on Hermione. "She's in the kitchen with Molly."

He nodded. "Excellent. Everyone, please excuse us for a moment. Remus, let's walk."

"Good luck, mate," Bill muttered.

Arthur was silent as they circled the house, leaving everyone behind. Remus stuffed his hands in his pockets to hide his clenched fists, all of his energy focused on staying relaxed. Arthur was going to yell, to lecture. He knew that. The sooner he got started, the sooner it would be over.

"I heard you had a bit of a shock with Molly yesterday," Arthur said.

Remus looked over to see the older wizard grinning slightly. "It wasn't my best moment," he admitted.

"No, I imagine it wasn't." Waving his wand, Arthur conjured two chairs on the front lawn, gesturing for Remus to have a seat. Sighing, Arthur looked at the man who helped keep his family safe during the war, the man who had apparently decided his surrogate daughter was now his. His wife may keep a not-so-secret stash of romance books in the attic, but Arthur was the romantic in the family. He was aware of werewolf mating traditions, a fascinating and rare event. On one level, he was happy Remus found the person who completes him. The man deserved his happiness.

He just wished it wasn't with his Hermione.

"It's no secret that Molly and I had hoped Hermione would settle down with Ron or one of the twins," he began. "We love her as if she was our own – not as if, she *is* ours – but it would have been nice to make it official."

"I'm sorry something that was decided before she and I even knew of the other's existence ruined your plans," Remus replied through gritted teeth.

Arthur sighed. "Don't get snippy, Remus. I know what tomorrow is. And I know this is not something either of you could control. I want to thank you for waiting as long as you did before making your claim. I can't imagine that was easy and I appreciate your sacrifice."

Remus didn't know what to say in return, so he nodded.

"She is of age, so I'm not going to lecture you about that," he continued. "I'm sure you're tired of hearing it."

"It's come up a time or two," he muttered.

Arthur chuckled. "And it will again. The people who know you and Hermione, who honestly care about you, will be fine. Eventually. It will take time, but they'll get there."

"That's comforting; thank you."

"Of course, it would help if you would do the right thing and marry her. I know this generation likes to do things backwards, but a young woman shouldn't be living with two adult men, one of whom is her soul mate, without legalities."

Remus ran his fingers through his hair. Leaning forward in his chair, he rested his elbows on his knees. "We haven't even been together for a full cycle, Arthur. It's a little soon to be discussing marriage, isn't it?"

"Perhaps, but then you've known she's yours for more than six years, correct?"

He had that gleam in his eye again. He looked suspiciously like the twins. Remus never thought he'd prefer Molly's yelling, but he could deal with that better than Arthur's quiet nudging.

"It's still illegal," Remus reminded him.

Arthur smiled indulgently. "For now."

Remus shook his head. He wasn't going to let it go, was he? "Arthur, if I could sufficiently put into words how much I love Hermione Granger, I would, but there aren't enough in the English language."

"That's lovely, Remus," he replied. "But I already know you love her. I saw it before she did."

"What?"

"My friend, you weren't the best at hiding your feelings. The rest of us were running around to protect Harry and you put Hermione first. You were always watching her; therefore I was always watching you. I mentioned before how grateful I am that you waited to stake your claim. Please know that if you hadn't waited as long as you did the conversation that would have followed would not be as pleasant as the one we're having now."

"This is pleasant?"

Arthur laughed. "Of course! It's a lovely evening, our friends are here and we're celebrating the birthday of your true love. How can it be anything but pleasant?" Pushing himself to his feet, Arthur turned to Remus and held out his hand. Remus quickly stood up. "You are a good man, Remus. Hermione will be good for you and you will be good for her. Do not give me a reason to ever think differently."

Shaking his hand firmly, Arthur made the chairs disappear and walked away, whistling softly.

"Are you all right?" Hermione whispered in Remus' ear. They were sitting at a picnic table, Hermione in-between Remus and Sirius. Dinner had just appeared and everyone was busy filling their plates, their attention diverted from them for the moment.

"I'm fine," he whispered back. "How are you?"

She leaned into his side, resting her head on his shoulder. "Fine." She closed her eyes. She'd been tense all day; the full moon, Remus had said, and now she just wanted to sleep. Sitting up, she forced herself to be part of the conversations around her, jumping slightly when Remus rested his hand on her knee. He kept it there throughout dinner, keeping her centered. He could feel her tense when it was time for presents, her reluctance to be the center of attention as Molly directed her to a chair next to a small table piled with gifts. She shot Remus a desperate look and he responded by widening the chair and sitting beside her, an arm around her shoulders, as she unwrapped books, clothing and, her favorite gift: a collection of photographs of her, Harry and Ron from their years at Hogwarts.

"I forgot how big your teeth were!" Ron exclaimed, staring at a photo of the three of them after Harry's first Quidditch game first year.

She rolled her eyes. "Thanks, Ronald."

She turned the pages slowly. There was a photo of the three of them hugging in the Great Hall at the end of second year and another of a jubilant Ron and a pouting Hermione; that must have been after Dumbledore excused final tests for the year. Remus smiled at the photo of the three of them dressed up for the Yule Ball and a group picture of Dumbledore's Army. There was a picture of the three of them sleeping on the couch in Sirius' house during a school vacation and another of Harry and Hermione tossing food into Ron's open mouth.

"What a lovely gift," Mrs. Weasley remarked. "Who is it from?"

McGonagall raised her hand. "Remus had owled me to see if we had any photos at Hogwarts, as you sacrificed yours when you left home, Hermione."

Hermione smiled at her, eyes shining with unshed tears. "This is amazing. Thank you, professor."

She smiled kindly. "Don't thank me. Thank Professor Lu – thank Remus."

Hermione turned toward Remus and kissed him lightly on the lips, their first public show of affection. Well, a deliberate public show of affection. "Thank you," she whispered when she pulled away.

"Anything for you," he whispered in response.

"Oi! Hermione, open ours next!" Fred cried, plopping a medium-sized box covered in purple paper in Hermione's lap.

"No!" Nearly everyone shouted, prompting Molly to rush into the house for the cake.

Fred turned to his brother. "We hang out with an ungrateful lot, George."

"That we do, Fred."

The party was breaking up when Kingsley approached Remus and Hermione. The couple was sitting on top of one of the picnic tables, watching the twins' fireworks display. "Could I speak with the two of you? Privately?"

Nodding, Remus hopped off the table and helped Hermione down, holding on to her hand as they followed the new Minister of Magic into the house. Gesturing for them to take a seat on the couch, he perched at the end of an armchair, his expression solemn as he studied them.

"I want to apologize first for putting you on the spot, Remus," he began.

"What does he -" Hermione started to say.

"This is not the time," Remus told Kingsley.

"It is the time. I understand your reluctance to come to work at the Ministry, given its views on werewolves in the past, but you have an opportunity to make a difference, Remus."

Hermione looked between the two men. "What is he talking about?"

Remus sighed. "He wants me to work at the Ministry to create new legislation that would benefit the werewolf community."

Hermione's eyes lit up. "That's wonderful! Remus, you would be the perfect person to speak out for the population and -" She stopped talking, knowing how much he would hate to make the part of himself he hates, the part he tried to ignore most days, the focus of his working life. It wasn't fair. He'd be the perfect person to help Kingsley, but at what cost? She squeezed his hand, a wordless gesture to let him know she supported his decision, whatever it may be. He leaned over to kiss her cheek in thanks.

Kingsley cleared his throat. "Actually, I was thinking the two of you could work together on this project."

"What?" Remus asked.

"She's your mate, you are hers. There's no one else who understands how werewolves feel more than you, Remus, and there's no other witch who understands werewolves better than Hermione. From what I understand, the two of you work best when you're together, so why not bring that dynamic to the Ministry?"

Hermione looked at Remus, her eyes wide. He was speechless.

Kingsley stood up. He wasn't a politician for nothing. He knew when to press forward and when to step back. Wishing Hermione a happy birthday, he clasped Remus on the shoulder.

"Please think about it," he said. "I'll be in touch."

Chapter 16

Hermione tried to push Remus away, but he captured her wrists in one hand and pinned them above her head, running his free hand down her body.

"You're supposed to be sleeping!"

"How can I sleep when I have the most beautiful woman in the world laying next to me?"

He ducked his head and kissed her, his tongue tracing her lips before it slid inside to tangle with hers. She sighed and melted into his kiss. Remus' kisses were addictive. He could be soft, intimate one moment, deep and seductive the next. She never knew what to expect from him. Would he tease? Would he dominate?

He let go of her wrists, sighing as she brought her hands down to rest his shoulders, her fingers digging in to the muscles underneath his scarred skin. Their mouths mated as she slid her hands lower, exploring the hard ridges of his torso. She ran her nails over his flat stomach, smiling as he groaned. "Be careful," he warned. "This close to the full moon ... I can't promise I'll be gentle."

Pushing herself up so she could flip him over, Hermione scrambled on top of Remus. "Who says I want you to be?"

He smiled, a wolfish look on her face, before he grabbed her hips, lifted her slightly and slammed her down on his length, his cock filling her so hard, she screamed. Sitting up, he tangled his hands in her hair as she wrapped her legs around his waist, rocking deeper into him. He kissed the tendons in her neck, licking, nibbling. Fire shot through her veins.

He planted his feet on the bed and thrust upwards. "Hermione," he moaned. "Harder! I need you -" He didn't finish the sentence. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her, swung his legs out of bed and stood, still inside her. He strode to his desk and pulled out, smiling at her huff of frustration. He kissed her hard and spun her around so her back was against his chest. Before she could wrap her head around what was happening, he had the upper half of her body splayed over the desk. He kicked her legs wide, wrapped an arm around her waist and thrust inside her.

"Remus!"

Her hands wanted to claw at something as he pounded inside her, but the surface of the desk was smooth. She'd lost count the number of times she's been with Remus. Thirty? Fifty? They could never get enough of each other, but this time, tonight, was different. Even when he was rough, he was gentle, but tonight it was all Moony. He wasn't making love to her. He wasn't having sex. He was *fucking*.

And it was amazing.

The harsh slap of their bodies echoed throughout the room as he moved, his strength pushing her further into the cool wood. It was uncomfortable and wasn't at the same time.

"Yes." She pushed her hips back to meet his thrusts. He responded by going faster, harder, his grip on her waist tightening as his free hand slid down to find her clit, his fingers rubbing the pulsing flesh.

"I want you to scream, Hermione," he demanded, his strokes never slowing, his fingers never stopping. She could barely hear his command over the roar in her head. "I want you to scream my name when you come. Do you understand?"

The palms of her hands slapped against the desk as he changed the angle of his thrusts, hitting a spot that made her close her eyes and moan.

"Do it!" he yelled.

"Remus ... please ... Remus, don't stop ... REMUS!"

She detonated, red spots appearing behind her eyes as she convulsed. He didn't slow his thrusts, his fingers didn't stop moving. He kept going, pushing her higher. She was so tight, so wet. The way she gripped him was driving him insane, but he was going to make her come again.

"I can't," she gasped.

"You will," he growled. She'd have bruises later. The idea of his marks on her skin pleased him. He wanted her so much. She shifted to stand on the tips of her toes, making him sink deeper. He felt her walls grip him, heard her breathing break as he thrust. She was pleading, begging, her hands fisted on the desk. "So close ... Hermione ..." And then his world exploded and he held on to the one thing that could keep him grounded.

Her.

"Does it hurt?"

He lifted his head from his pillow to look at Hermione. She was lying next to him, her head on his chest, one hand tracing his scars, her movement slowing over the biggest one; the one that made him a monster.

"The scar?"

"No. Changing."

"Yes."

"But you don't hurt yourself anymore, right? Because of the Wolfsbane?"

He sighed. "No, I know who I am. But becoming Moony and then myself; it takes a toll."

She nodded. "Why the cage? If you have control over Moony, why lock yourself up every full moon?"

She could feel him shrug. "I want to be sure I don't hurt anyone."

"Do you want me there tomorrow? When you change?"

He shook his head. "No. If you could come after, I know that will help, but I don't want you to see me ..."

She sat up. "I saw you once before, remember?"

"That was enough." He doesn't like to think about that night in the Forbidden Forest. He knew what was going to happen, saw the horror and fear on her face as the moon rose. He could live a thousand lifetimes and never forget how helpless he felt, knowing he was responsible for putting her life in danger.

"Remus -"

"Hermione, please," his voice was weary.

"I just ... I don't know why you hate Moony so much," she said quietly. "If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be here."

His gaze narrowed. "What do you mean?"

She gave him a small smile. "Do you honestly think you would have me like this without Moony claiming me as his mate? Remus, I love you, but if fate had left us up to you, and you alone, you'd die a spinster."

He glared at her. "I prefer the term bachelor."

"Fair enough." She laughed and pressed her lips against his forehead. "An extremely sexy bachelor, but alone nonetheless. In my opinion, you owe the wolf so much gratitude for bringing us together."

Tugging until she was in his arms again, he kissed the top of her head. "I'll tell him you said thank you."

"Do you have a preference on reading material?"

Remus looked over from his perch in his bed, a book in his hands. Hermione was sitting cross-legged in front of his bookshelves, wearing one of his old T-shirts, her hair piled in a messy knot on top of her head. It was early afternoon. He had managed to sleep until 10 a.m.

and enjoyed breakfast in bed with his amazing woman. She insisted on a quiet day leading up to that night, kicking Sirius and Harry out of the house so he could rest.

"Reading material?"

She looked over. "Last month I read to you. Do you not remember?"

His brow furrowed as he tried to evoke memories of that night. "Sorry, sweetheart; it's a bit of a blur."

She shrugged. "That's OK. It was *Pride & Prejudice*, which I don't think Sirius particularly cared for, so I thought I'd switch it up."

He smiled. "You're going to read to me again?"

"Of course. I'm not an Anignus like Sirius, but I need to do something."

Remus leaned against his headboard and sighed happily. She was going to read to him. She was going to spend her night in a cold, drafty basement and read to him because she knew it would sooth the restlessness.

"I love you," he told her.

"I love you, too."

"I thought I requested the sex book," Sirius grumbled. It was nearing 8 p.m. Remus had moved to the basement an hour ago after standing in the kitchen for five minutes with his arms around her, not moving nor talking, but breathing in her scent. He had pulled away reluctantly, pressed one soft kiss to her lips and said good bye.

Hermione was prepping her tray for the night. Tea. Water. Biscuits and the two books: *The Complete Sonnets and Poems* by William Shakespeare and a worn book of fairy tales she found under Remus' bed. The inscription inside was from his mother. When she held it up with a questioning look on her face, he had simply nodded his assent.

"I didn't want you to get too riled up," she teased, hip checking Sirius as she glanced around the kitchen to make sure she had everything she needed. Satisfied all was well, she sat at the kitchen table.

"You OK, love?"

She looked over ay Sirius and smiled. "Fine, thank you. Just thinking."

Sirius got a glass of water for himself and joined Hermione. "I noticed a certain werewolf looked less tense this evening."

She blushed.

"Come, love, I'm only teasing," Sirius ruffled the top of her head. "I know you are good for him, in more ways than physical. The past month has had its ups and downs, but I, for one, couldn't be happier for Remus and for you. The two of you ... you just fit. I haven't seen a pair better suited for each other since James and Lily."

"I love him," Hermione said, a small smile on her lips.

"Sometimes it's as simple as that."

Nodding, she picked up his water and drank. Sirius watched and waited. He might not have a deep connection to the witch, but he did know her and she had something on her mind. If he was patient, she would blurt it out.

"Kingsley wants Remus and I to work at the Ministry."

Sirius raised an eyebrow at that. "Doing what?"

"I assume we'd be part of the Care of Magical Creatures Division. Kingsley wants to eradicate the anti-werewolf legislation, and wants our help writing new legislation."

Sirius nodded; his face thoughtful. He was aware that Kingsley wanted to remove the prejudice that had clouded the Ministry for decades and supported the man 100 percent. He always likes Kingsley, but at this moment he loved him. Something like this would be amazing for Remus. His friend could finally have the life he was meant to live. "Are you going to do it?"

Hermione shrugged. "I want to. I'm not so sure about Remus. He's worked so hard to separate the wolf from the man that something like this, no matter how great the result, could sever the split. He won't say it, but it scares him."

"He's more than a werewolf, Hermione."

"I know that. *You* know that. Harry knows that. The only person who doesn't, who refuses to acknowledge, it Remus. He is so damn stubborn!"

Sirius shook his head, amused by Hermione calling someone stubborn. "Give him time, love. He'll make the right decision."

She sighed. "I hope so."

The pair smiled at each other, each of them thinking of the man who was likely pacing the floor below them.

"So," Hermione shook off the gravity of the moment, "I have one last present to open."

Reaching under her chair, she pulled out the twins' present and sat on the table. Sirius leaned forward, his eyes glowing with curiosity.

"Count of three?" he asked.

"One -"

"Two -"

"Three."

Chapter 17

She leaned against the wall, the hard stone cool at her back, with her legs stretched in front of her. For two hours she had sat in the oversized armchair, reading fairy tales and sonnets to a quiet werewolf and lazy black dog; a dog who was now curled on a large cushion, sound asleep.

"He's not the best company, is he?" she asked the wolf. He cocked his head in response.

Sirius had insisted Hermione stay away from the cage, her chair far enough away to give her time to run should the werewolf get out. She protested, but he told her that was Remus' request and he would not put her in danger. With a quick glance at the dozing dog, Hermione stood quietly and tiptoed to the cage, the battered book of fairy tales still in her hand. The wolf raised his head as she approached, but his body stayed still.

Conjuring another cushion, Hermione settled on the floor, barely a foot from the cage. She thought she'd be nervous. She had never been this close to Remus as a werewolf before, but instead of anxious she felt almost at ease. She couldn't explain it. The knowledge was something greater than instinct; it simply was. She *knew* Moony. If she had met him in the woods, she was convinced she'd feel the same. He could never, would never, hurt her.

"Is this what it felt like for you when you first saw me?" she whispered. "I know I'm yours but the knowing ... it's stronger somehow, like something inside me clicked."

She leaned closer, her eyes locked with the wolf. Deep amber studied whiskey-colored brown. "He's wrong to hate you," she said after a minute. "And you're wrong to hate the man. If I can love both of you, surely you can learn to do the same?"

The wolf growled. It was low, barely audible, but it made Hermione smile. The animal was just as stubborn as the man. Unlucky for them, she was more obstinate than the two of them put together. His eyes narrowed, as if he heard her thoughts and disagreed.

"Sorry, but you chose me," she reminded him, waiting to see if he'd respond. When he laid his head on his paws, his eyes flicking to the book and back at her, she sighed. "Fine. We'll read."

A paw pushed through the bars to rest on her foot. Petting it absently, she paused at *Little Red Riding Hood*. "Why not?" she muttered and began reading.

"I should hurt you."

Hermione opened her eyes slowly and focused on Sirius, who was leaning over her with a dark look on his face.

"Hello to you, too."

"Don't," he snapped. He bent down, grabbed her hands and hoisted her to her feet. Using his wand, he made the chair and cushions disappear, and the tray of food and drinks float to the kitchen, all the while pulling her to the stairs, not saying a word.

Sirius dragged her to the kitchen, where he pushed her unceremoniously into a chair and before stomping to the stove to set the kettle for tea. She watched, fascinated, as he leaned against the counter, his back to her, breathing heavily.

"Tell me you took something." His voice was measured, as if it took tremendous effort to speak calmly.

"What?"

"Tell me one of those bottles Fred and George gave you was Liquid Luck or something like it, and that's why I woke up to see you snuggling with Remus this morning."

"Um ... I snuggle with Remus most mornings."

"NOT WHEN HE'S A WEREWOLF!" Sirius spun from the counter and marched to the table. He was furious. He was angry at her, mad at himself. He'd never left Remus to fend for himself during a full moon (well, aside from his years in Azkaban, but that couldn't be helped), and last night he had fallen asleep – *asleep!* – and woke to find his best friend lying outside of his cage, in the middle of the floor, around Hermione. For a split second, he feared she was dead. When he realized both were asleep, he slumped in relief before rage overtook him. "I thought you were the smart one!"

Hermione was confused. "I didn't open the cage, Sirius."

"What?"

"I didn't open the cage," she repeated. "I confess I sat next to it and, well, I guess held his paw, but I didn't open the cage. I would never do that to Remus. Or you."

He slumped in a chair. The color slowly returned to his face. Hermione leaned forward until her forehead was pressed against his. Closing her eyes, she breathed in the scent of him. Sirius Black. If anyone had told her that a wrongfully-accused escaped convict would eventually be the older brother she always wanted, she would have told them she was crazy. "I love you, you idiot."

Letting out the breath he didn't realize he was holding, he raised a hand to circle her neck, keeping her still for another minute. "Love you, too."

The tea kettle whistled, making witch and wizard jump in alarm. Their foreheads slammed together. Harry walked in to find both of them rubbing their heads and groaning.

"I don't want to know."

"I forgot to wish you a happy birthday." Sirius spoke around a mouthful of eggs.

Hermione looked up from her own breakfast and smiled. "You were too busy yelling at me."

"So it's just another day."

It was nearing the noon hour. Harry was at work and Remus was in bed, sleeping off the exhaustion of the night. Sirius was wide awake, thanks to sleeping most of the night before. Hermione was wired; there was no other word. She knew she should be exhausted, but she wasn't. Instead she felt ... invigorated. Not go out and conquer the world, but more like she took a step in the right direction last night and that, after months of perplexity, felt great.

"Anyway. Birthday," Sirius continued. "I was thinking of redoing my bedroom."

"That's my birthday present?"

"In a sense. I was thinking of moving to the second floor so you and Remus could have the third floor to yourselves."

Hermione stared at him. "I can't kick you out of your room, Sirius."

"I'm not asking you to. I'm vacating it. Let's face it; Harry isn't going to be living here much longer, not after Ginny graduates from Hogwarts, and you and Remus have an annoying habit of forgetting silencing charms most of the time – bravo, by the way; some of your moves sound extremely impressive."

"Shut it."

He smiled. "I want you and Remus to live happily ever after, but I want the two of you with me while you do it. Separate floor, separate living space, yeah? Almost like having your own place?"

He said it casually, but Hermione knew better. Sirius held tight to the people he loved. Alcohol and women were temporary distractions for his loneliness and madness he kept at bay for years. It wasn't until Remus gave up his small cottage to move into Grimmauld Place that the haunted look began to leave Sirius' eyes. He laughed and joked, but he wasn't the man he used to be. Too much time had passed. Too much violence, too much anger, but he could handle that as long as he had his friends nearby. He'd do anything, say anything, pay anything, if that meant they'd stay.

Hermione rested her hand on top of his. "I think it's a fantastic idea."

"Of course it is. I came up with it, didn't I?"

She rolled her eyes. "We'll have to talk to Remus, of course."

"Oh, I'm sure he'll miss not having me across the hall, but you can talk him into it. If not, just do that thing that makes him -"

"SHUT UP, SIRIUS!"

Remus felt like he was flying. Not flying on a broomstick flying, but floating in the air. It was almost like swimming but he wasn't wet. He couldn't feel anything but the air and it was ... lulling. Yes, that's the word.

"Mmm."

Hermione grinned and pressed harder on Remus' shoulders, the lotion automatically warming as she touched his skin. She wasn't sure what to think when she saw the collection of bottles from the twins, each lotion labeled with a different purpose – she especially wished Sirius hadn't seen the one labeled Seduction – but when she placed a dab of the one branded Soothing on her wrist and immediately felt her muscles melt, she knew Remus would benefit from the contents.

"Hermione?" Remus mumbled.

"It better be."

"What are you doing?"

She shifted from her perch on her knees above him, bringing her hands to the middle of his back. Judging by his groan, this was a good spot to focus on for the next few minutes. "I'm taking care of you."

"You're the best," he sighed.

"Thank you."

She continued her ministrations, smiling as his muscles practically dissolved under her hands. Fred and George, she decided, were amazing. She was going to throw herself at them the next time she saw them and then buy every bottle of their Soothing lotion.

"Remus?"

"Yes?" he slurred.

"Could you roll over, please?"

"Don't want to."

"I'm going to do the other side."

He lifted his head slightly. "Why?"

"So you won't hurt anymore."

He did as she asked; his breath hitching slightly as he rolled over. The content look she expected to see on his face wasn't there. Instead, he looked pensive.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm going to hurt again next month," he sighed.

"Then I'll do this next month."

He opened his eyes. The flatness in them made her nervous. "Remus?"

"You deserve more than this, Hermione," he said dully. "You deserve to be with a man can take care of you. Makes you happy. You shouldn't have saddled yourself with an old man like me."

"That's the exhaustion talking."

"No, it's not."

"You're being melodramatic." She rested his arm on her thigh as she started rubbing, working her way slowly from wrist to shoulder and down again. She focused on her task and ignored the bubble of fear in her stomach.

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. You never let yourself be happy." He closed his eye again, his mouth set in a grim line. Hermione wouldn't call it pouting, but it was close. Leaning forward, she kissed him softly. "You make me happy, Remus."

"I'm sorry you're stuck with me," he whispered.

"I'm glad you're stuck with me."

He was asleep minutes later, the worry lines smoothing away as his breath evened. Hermione tightened the lid on the bottle and sat back on her heels, watching him. He was heartbreakingly beautiful in sleep. "I'm going to fight for you, Remus," she promised.

An hour later, she was back in his bed, this time lying on her side, her chest pressed to his back, one hand slowly running through his hair as she drifted toward sleep.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled.

"I know."

He took her hand in both of his, squeezing lightly. "I'm going to marry you someday." His voice nearly inaudible, but Hermione knew what she heard. Her hands stilled for a second before she resumed her strokes.

"I look forward to it," she said.

Chapter 18

Hermione yawned, made a note on her parchment, and resumed studying George, who was sitting on a stool in front of Ron, listening as his brother gave a play-by-play account of the last Quidditch World Cup. His eyes were glassy.

"How long has it been?" George asked morosely.

Hermione checked the clock. "Twenty minutes."

"I'm calling it; this batch is crap." He swept out of the room in frustration.

"But I hadn't got to the part about Wood's block on the third attempt," Ron told Hermione, looking rather dejected.

She smiled indulgently at him. Ron knew she and the twins were testing new products today and needed someone to serve as a lecturer. He didn't know more than that and, frankly, didn't care to. Instead, he told himself they all wanted to spend time with him and listen to his stories.

It was better for his ego.

Three vials. Fred, George and Hermione had teste three of the flavored Time Flies vials and none made Ron's incessant storytelling, well, fly by. George managed to listen longer than Fred and Hermione combined so they owed him lunch, but Hermione was frustrated. She only had three vials left. If none of them worked, she'd have to start over.

"Hermione?"

"Hmm?"

"How do you know you're in love?"

She looked up in surprise. "Ronald Weasley, are you in love?"

He shrugged, but his cheeks were slightly red. Work frustrations were immediately pushed aside. Hermione took the seat George abandoned to sit close to her friend. "Talk to me."

"I met her about a few months ago at that coffee shop Harry likes. You know, the one where they don't make you feel like a prat for getting whipped cream?"

"That isn't coffee, its ice cream."

"And that's why we don't ask you to join us," he retorted. "Anyway, she works there and we got to talking and ... I like her."

"You more than like her, Ron," Hermione grinned. "If you didn't, you wouldn't ask me about love."

He shifted a bit in his stool. "I don't know," he hedged. "I mean, she's great, but she's a Muggle, so ..."

Hermione sniffed. "What's wrong with that?"

"I knew you'd take that the wrong way," he said, comforted by her predictability. "There's nothing wrong with that, but I've never had to say 'Hey, I'm a wizard' to anyone before. I'm not you or Harry."

Hermione nodded slowly. That made sense. Ron was a pureblood; no one in his family has been with anyone less than a half-blood, not that status ever meant anything to him or his family. The Weasleys would welcome anyone Ron loved with open arms.

"Are you worried you tell her that you're a wizard and she'll think you're crazy?"

"That's part of it."

"What's the other part?"

"Let's say I tell her, OK, and she's fine with it and we continue to see each other and she meets the family and she meets you and Harry, and everything is going well, but then suddenly it isn't and we break up. What do I do? Do I trust her to keep this a secret or do I take away her memories of me?"

"That doesn't seem fair," Hermione said.

"Aughh!" Ron banged his head against the table. "Why couldn't we just love each other? It would have made life so much easier!"

She leaned over to ruffle his hair. "Would it really?"

He snorted. "No. We'd have killed each other by now. Or, you know, Remus would have killed me, seeing that you belong to each other." He pillowed his head on his arms. "I never thought I'd be jealous of a werewolf, to just *know* someone is right for you."

Hermione laid her head next to Ron, smiling when he nudged closer. There were times she missed having Harry and Ron underfoot. The three of them were a team for so long, them against the world, that not being together all the time was more of an adjustment than she realized. Sure, she and Harry lived at the same house, but he was rarely there, either working or sneaking into Hogwarts to visit Ginny. She wondered what his father would say if he knew his invisibility cloak and the Marauder's Map were used for romantic escapades. Given the stories she's heard from Remus and Sirius, he'd be proud. She knew Sirius was. Remus abstained from giving an opinion.

"I'd like to meet her," she murmured.

"I can arrange that."

"Good," she replied, but didn't move. This was nice. She wanted to stay like this for a little bit.

"He did it. Ron finally killed someone with his incessant chatter," Fred announced from the doorway. "I told you this was going to happen, George."

"Poor Hermione; to fight so bravely in battle only to die listening to the going-ons of our little brother," George sighed.

"We're not dead." Hermione kept her head down. "We're lamenting."

"Oh. OK." Fred grabbed a stool to join the pair, laying his head next to Hermione's. George watched for a moment, shouted at Verity to keep an eye on the store, and joined the trio, settling on Ron's other side.

"Do either of you have a crisis at the moment?" Hermione asked.

"I'm good," George said. "Fred?"

"Right as rain, brother mine."

"So why are you here?" Ron grumbled.

"Who didn't love a good pout every now and then?" Fred asked.

No one could argue with that logic, so their heads stayed down until Ron's growling stomach made lunch the top priority.

Sirius loved home improvement projects. He loved home improvement stores. He loved the crazy inventions Muggles came up with to assist them in their projects. Sure, he could accomplish what he needed to do with magic, but why use a spell when you could have power tools? At least that's the argument he used every time he started something new. Unfortunately, neither Remus nor Hermione agreed with him.

Remus flipped through the pile of catalogs Sirius had picked up that morning. "Do you really think you need a power saw?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Hermione's room is a lot smaller than mine. If I'm going to be happy with my completely-amazing-and-unselfish-birthday-gift-of-which-you've-yet-to-thank-me, I need to make her room bigger."

Remus sighed. "I apologize for not thanking you sooner for your completely amazing and unselfish birthday gift for Hermione."

"And you."

"And me."

"You're welcome." Sirius circled another item in the catalog.

"Where will you store all of this?" Remus flinched as he read some of the product descriptions. He didn't trust Sirius with sharp objects. He was lucky to get a fork at dinner.

"Basement."

"The basement is currently spoken for, Padfoot. I don't think a werewolf and power tools make a smart combination."

"Ordinarily, I would agree with you, but given that Moony has Hermione and no longer needs a cage, I think we can -"

"Wait; what?"

Sirius looked up. "Moony. Hermione. You."

"I'm aware of the key players, Sirius."

"Right," Sirius focused on the catalog again. What was a laser level? He wasn't sure, but it sounded cool, so he circled that, too. "Well, full moon, we were there, Moony was in his cage, Hermione was reading, I fell asleep -"

"You fell asleep?"

Damn. He hadn't planned on including that part in the story. "She wasn't reading the book I requested! I know you have a soft spot for Muggle children stories, but I do not and I got bored. Sue me."

Remus sighed. "Continue."

"When I fell asleep, she was in her chair, Moony was in his cage. When I woke up, you were out of the cage, sleeping with Hermione."

Remus shrugged. "She probably opened the cage when the sun came up."

Sirius shook his head. "I was awake seconds before the sun rose. I saw you shift from wolf to man."

Remus paled.

"She's fine, Moony! You saw her yesterday, and this morning. She's fine!"

Remus nodded, but he still looked scared and, frankly, Sirius didn't blame him. He had the same fear when he saw the wolf curled around the witch, but after he ranted and really thought about the situation, it made perfect sense. It was Moony who recognized Hermione and Moony who claimed her. Of course he was going to take every opportunity he could to be by his mate during the full moon.

"This is just so ... it's weird," Remus said.

"Weird? You, the smartest kid in our class, the man who always has his nose in a book, just learned that your wolf self is capable of behaving somewhat human, without fear of death, and all you can say is 'weird?'"

Remus rubbed the back of his neck. Moony was laughing at him, too, but it wasn't a mocking sound. When did the wolf start humoring him? "I don't know what to tell you, Padfoot. This is all new to me. I mean, five weeks ago, Hermione wasn't mine. I hadn't claimed her and probably would not have done so if she hadn't figured it out."

"Brilliant girl. Stupid man."

"Thank you," he replied sarcastically.

"Don't thank me, thank your lycanthropy," Sirius said. "We both know if it wasn't for Moony, you never would have made a move on Hermione."

"If it wasn't for Moony, I wouldn't feel the need to make a move on Hermione."

Sirius snorted. "Please. You'd love the witch even if she wasn't yours to claim. The two of you are perfect for each other in every way possible. It's just an added bonus that you are soul mates."

Remus leaned back on his chair. "You know, Hermione said something similar."

"I told you; brilliant girl."

Remus stared at his friend thoughtfully. No one would ever consider Sirius Black an intellectual – and he'd happily hex anyone who did – but the man was a genius when it came to those he cared about. It was almost scary the way he was able to pick up on people's feelings before they realized it themselves. Scary and annoying. "Do you really think we would be together if we weren't meant to be?"

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Why even ask that? You were always meant to be."

Hermione was giddy when she floored home that evening. There is no other word for it. After two more failed tests – and even Ron was beginning to get bored with his stories – Fred drank the peppermint-flavored Times Flies and listened as his brother talked about his pseudo girlfriend for nearly two hours. At first, Hermione and George were convinced Fred was just gathering information to use against Ron when he finally got up the nerve to introduce Rebecca to his family, but when he shook his head suddenly and said "I'm sorry?" in the middle of Ron's description of her hair – "It's brown, but not brown-brown. There are streaks of gold in it, and red, which is fitting considering I'm a Gryffindor, but she wouldn't know what that means, but I think it means something. Oh, and it has these, I don't know, waves

and when the sun shines just right, you can imagine you are in a field and ..." – they realized he had been in a time-speed daze the whole time.

Hermione brewed a new batch for a second round of tests just to be sure. She and the twins were going to watch an extremely dull movie. She tried not to take it personally when Fred suggested she ask Remus for a recommendation.

"Honey, I'm home!" she jokingly called out, throwing her satchel and cloak on one of the kitchen chairs. She saw the pile of home improvement magazines and catalogs, and shook her head. She hoped Remus was able to talk Sirius out of power tools that required electricity. He had yet to realize they wouldn't work in the wizard world, choosing instead to believe that she and Remus were big sticks in the mud who never wanted him to have fun.

"Dining room!" Remus called.

That was different. They never used the dining room. It was the meeting room of Order Headquarters during the war, but ever since Voldemort's demise, the large space had stood empty aside from the extremely large table and chairs. Hermione slid open the pocket doors, surprised to see Harry, Remus and Sirius bent over what appeared to be a large parchment covered in scribbles.

"Do I want to know?" she asked.

Remus shook his head. "Get out while you can."

"Hermione!" Sirius cried.

"Too late," Harry told her.

Sirius beckoned her closer to the table. Upon closer inspection, she saw that the parchment wasn't the latest drawing by Bill and Fleur's daughter, but crudely-drawn sketches of Grimmauld Place. "Remus and I were trying to figure out what to do with the extra space of what will be your floor -"

"Yeah, thanks for telling me you're moving," Harry interrupted.

"I'm moving up one flight of stairs, Harry."

"Whatever." He popped another piece of Remus' chocolate in his mouth.

"Sirius thought maybe you'd want your own library," Remus told her.

"We already have a library," Hermione said.

"Yeah, and you and Remus are the only ones who use it, so what if we made that part of your living quarters and turned the space downstairs into something fun?"

"Libraries are fun," Hermione and Remus said at the same time.

"See?" Sirius remarked without looking up from the parchment. "Meant to be."

Chapter 19

"Do I know of a boring movie?"

Hermione nodded, trying not to laugh at the expression on Remus' face.

"Why would you ask me that?"

"Technically," she began, "I'm not the one asking, but playing owl for Fred."

Remus watched from the bathroom door as she brushed her teeth. He loved watching her get ready for bed. There was an intimacy in the act that went beyond sleeping together. "And Fred needs a boring movie recommendation because ..."

"Oh! I forgot to tell you! I think I've perfected Time Flies. We tested it today and the peppermint-flavored option could be the one. It worked for Fred, but we need to do another test with a bigger group."

"Hence a boring movie selected by Remus?"

She walked over and kissed him on the cheek. "You're adorable when you pout."

"I don't pout."

"Yes, you do," she replied in a sing-song voice on her way to his bed. "You, Remus Lupin, are an excellent pouter – and brooder – but you are so cute when you do it that I don't mind."

He watched as she plumped the pillows and picked up her book, seemingly unconcerned that in the past five minutes she called essentially called him both boring and a pouter. Walking to the bathroom to brush his teeth, he caught sight of his face in the mirror.

Shit.

He deliberately smoothed his expression before walking out of the bathroom, which was pointless because she was completely absorbed in her book, he took his place in the bed beside her, and grabbed his own book from the nightstand.

This was nice, too. Certain people – *Fred* – might consider it boring, but he was sharing a bed with the woman he loved, both of them relaxing after a long day. Comforting was nice. Not boring.

"Ron has a secret girlfriend."

Conversation with one's significant other also was nice.

"Who told you this?"

"Ron."

Remus turned a page. "How can she be a secret if he's the one telling you the secret?"

Hermione shook her head. He could be too literal at times. "She's a secret because not that many people know about her. It's probably because she's a Muggle and he's never dated outside the wizarding world."

Now he was intrigued. "How did Ron meet this woman?"

"Their eyes met across a cappuccino machine."

"I'm sorry?"

"Coffee shop."

"He goes for coffee in the Muggle world?"

"Apparently Muggles do not judge those for getting whipped cream in their coffee."

Remus shook his head. "That's not coffee. That's ice cream."

Hermione's face lit up and she kissed Remus enthusiastically on the lips. "That is one of the reasons I love you," she exclaimed.

He wasn't quite sure what she meant by that, but he got a kiss out of the deal, so he'll take it.

"Anyway, so he's been sort of seeing Rebecca for a few months now and he's ready for some of us to meet her."

"Some of us?"

"Me. Harry. Ginny. You."

"Why me?"

"Because you're mine," she said in an offhand voice, her attention focused more on the book than the conversation. "I told him we'd be free for dinner this weekend, if that works for you?"

He nodded. "I have no plans beyond being with you."

She smiled. "Great; it will be a triple date!" She turned a page and let out a little laugh.

"Funny part?" he asked distractedly, his focus on his own book.

"No, not the book. I just realized our triple date will be my first date."

"Our first date?"

"Well, yes, and my first date ever. I have to tell you, when I dreamed about my first date, I didn't think Harry and Ron would be part of it."

Remus set down his book. "Wait. You've never gone on a date before?"

She shook her head.

"What about Krum?" He hated even saying the name.

She laughed. "That was a school dance! A date is when the guy shows up, brings you flowers and takes you somewhere. At least, that's what all the books and movies make it to be." She closed her book, tucking her finger between the pages to save her place. "Why? What was your first date?"

Mandy Crimmins, third year. They went to Hogsmeade together. He took her to The Three Broomsticks for lunch and held her hand as they walked around the village. He bought her a chocolate flower at Honeydukes and kissed her before they were back on school grounds. But he couldn't tell Hermione that. "I'm sorry." He twirled one of her curls around his finger. He was an idiot. "I haven't taken you out on a date."

She rolled her eyes. "Remus, we're soul mates. People usually go on dates because they're searching for their soul mates. We don't have to do all that; fate decided our future."

That wasn't enough. She deserved more. "That doesn't mean we shouldn't be somewhat traditional."

Her grin was indulgent. "You are so sweet. Add that to the list of adjectives that describe you."

"You want to what?"

Harry was looking at him like he was crazy. Sirius was watching the entire scene with an amused expression.

"I want to take Hermione out on a date."

Harry was confused. He looked toward Sirius for help, but he just shrugged in response. "Um, Remus? You don't need to date Hermione. You love her. She loves you. You've shagged. You live together. She carries your mark on her neck. Doesn't all of that, I don't know, eclipse dating?"

"Harry, what did you and Ginny do when you first got together?"

"We fought Death Eaters."

"After that."

"I took her to dinner and we talked about fighting Death Eaters."

Remus sighed. It was amazing the boy had a girlfriend. "The key words are 'took her to dinner.' I haven't done that with Hermione."

"It's true," Sirius piped up. "She does all of our cooking. If I remember correctly, you got several meals in bed leading up to the shagging."

Harry covered his ears and closed his eyes. "La-la-la-la-la! I can't hear you!"

"Grow up, Harry!" Remus said with a frustrated growl. "It's Wednesday. We're going to dinner with Ron and Rebecca -"

"Who's Rebecca?" Sirius interrupted.

"Saturday night, which means I need to take Hermione on her first date Friday."

"You mean your first date," Harry corrected.

"No, I mean *her* first date. She's never had one."

"She's never had a first date?" Harry asked. He closed his eyes to think. There was the dance with Krum, but that was a school event and didn't count. She snogged Ron a few times, but they never actually went anywhere. She did a few Girl Nights with Ginny and friends ...

"How could you have shagged her without taking her to dinner first?" he yelled.

"It's not like I planned it!" Remus yelled back. "I wanted to have a mature conversation about the whole werewolf mate thing and she – things got out of hand!"

"Well, you're going to fix it, Remus! You are going to wine her and dine her, and give her the best first date in the history of first dates."

"Which brings us back to the beginning of this conversation: I want to take Hermione on a date."

Harry nodded. "Right. OK. Well, let's go."

The two of them left the kitchen. Sirius remained in his chair. "I'm still waiting for someone to tell me who the bloody hell Rebecca is!" he yelled.

"Hermione?"

Hermione didn't look up from the cauldron, holding up a finger to stop whichever twin was at the door from talking. Counting under her breath, she finished adding gillyweed to the bubbling potion. When she reached 10, she lifted the silver spoon to stir the potion, counter-clockwise, six times. She lowered the fire's flame and stepped back from the table. "What's going –oh! Who got flowers?"

George handed her the bouquet of a dozen white moonflowers. "You."

Her face lit up. She automatically buried her face in the blossoms, breathing in their sweet scent. "You and Fred didn't have to get me flowers."

George smiled ruefully. "Well, now I feel like a prat. They aren't from us; they're from Remus."

"Did you have another fight?" Fred peeked in the room.

Hermione laughed. "No, sorry to disappoint. I wonder what got in to him."

Fred entered the lab, a large bag dangling from his hands. "This might answer your question."

Hermione passed the flowers to George, who accepted with a shrug and decided to sniff them, too. Hermione looked inside the bag. She pulled out an oversized silver box tied with a red ribbon. Placing the box on the table, away from the flame, she undid the ribbon and peeled back several pieces of tissue paper to reveal a maroon-colored knit wrap dress with three-quarter sleeves. A pair of knee-length brown boots was underneath another layer of tissue paper, along with a note.

My dearest Hermione,

I would be honored if you would accompany me to dinner tonight. I understand that living together makes it difficult for me to pick you up, so I have reached out to Molly Weasley who is looking forward to seeing you at the Burrow after work.

Please tell Fred and George they are not invited and to stop sneaking a peek in the box; there's no lingerie inside.

All my love,

Remus

Chapter 20

Hermione left work early. She was told to go after Fred and George deduced she was worthless, her focus more on the evening ahead than the potion she was brewing. Dragging her up the stairs to their flat, Fred practically forced her to the fireplace, blinking in surprise when she thrust her flowers in his arms.

"I don't know if they'll travel well," she called before disappearing in a burst of green light. Remus' flowers were the first a man had ever given her; she wasn't going to risk ruining them.

Stumbling gracelessly from the fireplace – and grateful Sirius wasn't around to make a joke – she looked around the Weasleys' living room, wondering how much Molly knew about that night. Judging by the big smile on the woman's face, Hermione guessed a lot.

"Hermione!" She hugged her, box and all. "This is so exciting!"

"So you know what's happening?"

Blue eyes twinkled as she pulled away. "I do, but don't bother asking me. I was sworn to secrecy."

"An Unbreakable Vow?" Hermione joked as she followed Molly to the kitchen.

"I do believe the thought crossed that man's mind. He's the determined sort, isn't he?"

Nodding, Hermione took a seat at the table, smiling gratefully for the cup of tea Molly set in front of her. She loved working with Fred and George, but neither man ever learned to brew tea properly, preferring sugary-sweet drinks to keep them moving.

"How is it going with you two?" Molly asked, her voice a mixture of curiosity and concern.

"Well, actually. We haven't had too many snags. He gets a little edgy right before the full moon and somewhat depressed after, but it's nothing I can't handle."

Molly smiled, sipping her own tea. "I have no doubt."

"We did have one fight," Hermione confessed. "It was when Harry found out and Remus got ... I don't think defensive is the right word. Territorial, I'd say. He pulled the 'I am the man' routine, you know?"

Molly sighed and nodded. "I hope you took care of it."

"I did," she sipped her tea to hide her smile. "I'll probably have to again, won't I?"

"I'd love to say no, or blame it on the lycanthropy, but men, as a species, are simple creatures. They tend to act first and think later, but I don't need to tell you that. You grew up helping

Harry and Ron get out of *their* scrapes. You'll find yourself having variations of the same conversation again and again, I'm afraid.

"But," she continued, not wanting Hermione's evening to be marred by their conversation, "it's the sweet things they do, like everything Remus has set up for tonight, that make their mistakes tolerable."

"He is sweet," she agreed.

Molly smiled and took Hermione's hand. "Remus Lupin is one of the kindest people I know. I always knew that if he ever allowed himself to love someone, and to be loved in return, it would be amazing. I will continue to feel remorse for how I reacted when I found out about you, but I want you to know I am happy for both of you."

Hermione sniffed, the tears she'd been holding back since she read Remus' note finally spilling over. She missed her mother. She was so happy Remus realized she'd want her surrogate mother around as she got ready for her first date.

"I love you," she told Molly.

"I love you, my girl."

Hermione finished her tea and Molly pushed her upstairs to the room she had shared with Ginny, where there were two more packages on the bed, plus another dozen moonflowers and a note.

To my Hermione,

Flowers can withstand floo travel.

Love always,

Remus

She opened the first box. New bottles of her favorite bubble bath, shampoo and all other toiletry items she needed in preparation for her date were nestled inside. "He didn't miss a step," she murmured, already looking forward to owling Ginny with her story.

Then she opened the last box and blushed. Tucked inside the crepe paper was a matching silk maroon bra and knickers, complete with garters, stockings and one final note.

My beloved Hermione,

For obvious reasons, I couldn't include this with the dress and the boots.

Always,

Remus

P.S.

I hope you're alone right now.

She giggled over the fact that a man as sexual as Remus could embarrass so easily, a trait that made the list of reasons why she loved him.

The list really was becoming quite long.

"Come in!" Hermione called after hearing Moll knock on the door. It was five minutes to seven and she had just finished sliding on her boots. Her hands were shaking. She had butterflies in her stomach. Why was she nervous? This was Remus. *Remus.*

"You look beautiful." Molly's eyes shined with unshed tears.

Hermione stood up. "I'm a fidgeting mess," she confessed.

"That's how first dates are supposed to feel." Molly soothed. She brushed a few curls off of Hermione's face. She had opted to wear her hair in a knot near the nape of her neck, though several curls had already slipped out of the pins. Small gold hoops were her only jewelry.

Hermione twisted her hands. "Should we go downstairs?"

"No! We'll wait here until Remus arrives so you can make an entrance."

Hermione shook her head frantically. "No!"

"Yes!"

"Why?"

"Because you only go on your first date once." Molly was adamant.

Hermione sighed and flopped on the bed, defeated. She knew better than to try to persuade the woman "Did you make Ginny do this, too?"

"Of course. It's a mother's right."

Remus took a deep breath before he knocked on the Weasleys' front door. He was dressed in charcoal gray trousers, a dark blue button-down shirt and a black pea coat. Sirius had catcalled when he walked down the stairs, which was the reaction he needed because shouting at his best friend to grow up helped relieve his nerves.

Why was he so jumpy? This was Hermione. *Hermione.*

"Remus!" Arthur opened the door with a large smile. "It's great to see you again! Come in!"

He smiled at the man who, in the span of two weeks, went from friend to the man he needed to impress to keep his lover happy. He could feel Moony's exasperation at the absurdity of it all. Remus almost agreed with the wolf; perhaps the pageantry of this was too much – but then Hermione walked down the stairs and, for a second, he couldn't breathe.

She was worth it. She was worth everything.

Moony, for once, agreed.

"You look amazing," he told her once he was sure he could speak without embarrassing himself.

She gave him a nervous smile. "So do you."

Arthur hugged Hermione goodbye and told Remus to behave himself while Molly rushed for the camera. "Just one picture" quickly turned into a dozen.

"Molly, dearest, they need to get going." Arthur gently took the camera out of his wife's hands.

Mouthing 'Thank you,' Remus kissed Molly goodbye and shook Arthur's hand, standing back as Hermione hugged them both. After helping her into her coat, he took her hand and they left, both letting out a huge sigh of relief after the front door closed.

"Can I kiss you now?" Remus took Hermione's face in his hands before she could respond.

"Yes, please."

The second his lips touched hers, their nerves disappeared. Everything was right again.

"Are you hungry?" Remus asked as they walked through London's Central neighborhood, her hand in his.

"A bit." She wondered why streets she'd walked a thousand times before looked different tonight. Then she glanced at the man on her left.

That's why.

They arrived at the famed Gordon's Wine Bar, Remus letting go of Hermione's hand only so he could rest his on the small of her back as they walked down the creaking stairs to the semi-lit room below. Following the waiter who smiled at the couple – he'd been the business long enough to recognize a first date when he saw one – he showed them to their table, which was set slightly apart from other couples enjoying a nice dinner out. Candles in wine bottles on the tables, aged wax dripping down the sides, made shadows dance on the aged wood walls. Hermione's romantic heart, the one she denied time and time again, fluttered at the romanticism of it all.

She pretended to study the menu, but she was really studying Remus. He had shaved, losing the slight scruff that usually covered his face this late in the day. She was pretty sure he got a haircut, too. The scars on his face looked were less noticeable in the dark lighting, but they never bothered her. All of Remus' scars were a reminder of his strength, of his innate goodness. He was a man who would rather take pain upon himself than hurt anyone.

He looked up, his brown eyes questioning. "What?"

"You are beautiful.

He blushed slightly as he reached across the table to take one of her hands in his. "You're taking all of my lines."

"Find new ones," she challenged.

Saying nothing as the sommelier arrived with their wine, he waited until the man left before he lifted his glass to hers in a toast. "I'll love thee with the breath, Smiles, tears, of all my life! – and, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death."

"You stole that one from Elizabeth Barrett Browning," she teased.

"The night is young," he promised.

They ordered tapas and a cheese board. Hermione fed small bites to Remus, loving the feeling his lips on her fingers. He loved the view he had every time she shifted closer to him.

"When did you realize you were a wizard?" Hermione twirled the stem of her wine glass, feeling wonderfully relaxed. She never wanted the night to end.

Remus leaned back in his chair and considered the question. "There was always a knowing, but I think that's easy to say because my father was one," he said after a minute. "My first bit of magic, though ... that had to be when I refused to take a bath after playing in the rain and the mud. Somehow I made the bathwater disappear."

Hermione laughed. "How old were you?"

"Five, maybe? My mom, I remember she looked so frustrated, but then she took my hand and we went back outside to wash in the rain. 'Water is water,' she said."

"She sounds like she was a wonderful person."

"She was," he replied, his eyes distant for a moment. "What about you?"

Hermione finished her wine. "When I got my letter from Hogwarts, of course."

"No, I mean the first time you realized you weren't like the other kids."

Hermione sighed. "I was always different from the other kids. The girls at my primary school wanted to play dolls and house, and I wanted to read. I wasn't interested in tea parties or playground games. I'd read about a game before I'd play it."

Remus smiled, picturing a young Hermione lugging around books bigger than her.

"But my first piece of magic, not that I knew it was magic at the time, had to be when my parents wanted me to go the car for a visit to my great-aunt's house. She was not a kind person and visiting her was torture. I refused, running up to my room, and when I slammed the door, I must have magically locked it because they couldn't get in and I couldn't get out."

"Were you scared?"

She shook her head and chuckled. "I was relieved! I could hear them pounding and they knew I tried to open the door, so it wasn't like I was in trouble. They blamed it on the warped wood and while they waited for the locksmith to arrive, I had the afternoon to read without interruption. It was wonderful."

"How old were you?"

"Mmm ... 8, I think."

The restaurant was nearly empty by the time they stood to go. Hermione expected them to return home, but instead Remus helped her into her coat, tucked her into his side and they walked along the South Bank, the lights of The London Eye acting as their guide as they walked along the Thames, following the sound of a lonely saxophone in Thames Park.

"May I have this dance?" Remus gestured to the empty pathway.

With a soft giggle, she stepped into his arms, linking hers around his neck as his hands settled on her waist. Their bodies brushed against each other as they swayed slowly in the dark night, the lights of London cutting through the trees the only reminder that they were not alone in this perfect moment.

"Thank you for the best first date of my entire life," Hermione whispered, her breath warm in his ear.

He brushed a light kiss against her lips, deepening it only when she moaned softly and tightened her arms around his neck. "Thank you for being my last first date."

Chapter 21

She expected them to go home when he took out his wand after their dance. She was wrong.

Hermione opened her eyes to a stonewashed cream cottage with maroon shutters and a thatched roof. A single light was glowing in one of the upstairs window. Remus took her hand, smiling at her look of confusion. "I debated about taking you back to the Weasleys' tonight," he said in a low voice as they strolled up the stone walkway to the front door.

"Why?"

He smiled. "I thought it would go with the first date experience; taking you somewhere that wasn't our home and leaving you with nothing more than a kiss good night, but when I realized that plan meant spending the night without you, I scrapped it for Plan B."

He took a small brass key out of his pocket and opened the front door, stepping aside so she could enter first. The entryway to the bed-and-breakfast tucked away in London's south end was small but welcoming, with flowers on the side table next to a small sign bidding guests a good evening. With his hand at the small of her back, Remus guided Hermione up the stairs, to the second bedroom on the left.

"Are you going to kiss me good night here and go to a different room?" Hermione asked in a teasing voice.

He leaned his forehead against hers. His eyes were dark. Hungry. "Never."

Instead, he swept her into his arms, and opened the door. He barely gave her a chance to look around the room before he was kissing her, his strides purposeful as he carried her to the king-sized canopy bed. He laid her down and then went back to the door to lock it, adding the spells to ensure their privacy before he returned to the bed. Instead of joining her, he stood by the side, his gaze both carnal and soft.

"Remus?"

"You are so beautiful." He ran one hand along her leg and, with a gentle tug, removed her left boot. He repeated his actions with the right boot, setting both beside him before he pulled her to a sitting position and removed her dress. He threaded his fingers through her hair and kissed her again, this time joining her on the bed, their bodies sliding until they were settled in the middle, she on her back and he on his side. Propping himself up on his elbow, he slowly trailed his knuckles along her thigh. Hermione swallowed nervously, the warmth that started in her stomach every time Remus kissed her sliding down to her center as she kept her gaze steady on his.

"I've been rough with you," he said quietly.

"No, you haven't."

"I have," he persisted. "Our first time ... I wanted you and I took you. I should have been slower, softer. I should have taken the time to worship you the way you deserve. Every time after that ... I should have been more."

"I've loved every moment with you," she confessed.

His calloused fingers played the fasteners on her garters. "I'm glad, sweetheart, but that doesn't mean I won't make it up to you." He moved his body over hers. "I need to make it up to you."

He dropped his mouth to lick along hers before he kissed her, going deep but staying light, careful to keep his weight off of her. She ran her hands along the hard ridges of his arms as his body slid down hers, his lips exploring the curves of her hips, the flatness of her stomach. His fingers unhooked the garters. Slowly, with a small hum of appreciation, he rolled the stockings down her legs, kissing along her calves, her knees. Hermione wiggled under his ministrations, desperate to touch.

"Remus ..."

He didn't respond. Instead, he licked his way up back up, only to pause at the juncture of her thighs. Using his teeth, he removed the small scrap of silk that covered her sex, repeating the devastatingly slow process of sliding it down her legs. She dug her fingers into his shoulders in frustration. He responded by nipping the inside of her thighs, lightly, but enough to make her jump.

"We have all night." The statement was somehow both a promise and a threat as he leaned forward to lick her slit.

Hermione arched her spine, moaning as he explored her folds. He knew, he always knew, exactly how to touch her. He knew what would drive her crazy, what would make her melt. She looked down her body as he lifted his head. She expected a wicked smile, the look he gave her when he knew he has her exactly where he wanted her and there's nothing she could do about it. Instead his expression was tender. Without saying anything, he dropped back down, his shoulders settling in-between her legs, spreading her thighs wide. Growling softly, his tongue lashed her clit, as he slid one finger inside, twisting. She hissed, feeling the shock from his touch from her head to the tips of her toes. He licked her again and slipped a second finger inside, playing, seeking, twisting in a rhythm that had her longing, aching, begging.

She was tight, so tense. The fingers she'd laced through his hair first pushed, then pulled. She wanted him closer, she wanted him away. It was too much and not enough. He loved her like this, his Hermione on the edge of insanity. He knew she wanted to let go, to scream her release, but there was that part of her, that stubborn part that wanted to hold on, to keep going. He knew it would take just one more touch, one more swipe of his tongue and she'd tumble, but he wasn't ready; not yet. He wanted her to go higher; he needed her to go higher. She was everything to him. He needed her to know that.

"Remus ... please."

Her voice trembled. She was shaking, her whole body a mass of nerves. He slid his large hand under her ass and pulled her closer to him. He feasted. There was no other word for her as he took everything she gave him and demanded more. She arched into his mouth, screamed his name, as she detonated into a million pieces.

"Gorgeous." He sat back, enormously pleased at the sight of her – flushed face, wild curls, eyes dark and mouth slightly open, her chest rising and falling as she caught her breath. Taking advantage of the moment, he unclasped her bra and tossed it across the room, but she grabbed his head before he could take her breasts into his mouth.

"Please," she tried to pull him up to her, unable to find the words to tell him how much she needed him. "Just please."

He slid off the bed and undressed quickly. He was back over her in seconds. He rubbed her cheekbones with his thumbs. "I wanted tonight to be about you," he told her.

"It is," she whispered, wrapping her legs around his waist. "But I need you. I need this to be about *us*."

He pressed his forehead against hers and slowly penetrated her, neither one breaking eye contact as inch by swollen inch he slid into *his* Hermione, *his* woman, *his* mate. The breath she didn't realize she was holding was let out on a sigh as he began to move in slow, shallow thrusts.

"Faster," she begged.

He complied, helpless to ignore her plea when she felt like she did. Her hands slid down his back and cupped his backside. She tilted her hips up, her nails biting into his flesh, as she met him thrust for thrust. He tried to hold on, desperate to draw it out, but it was hopeless. He can't get enough of her; he'll never get enough of her. He changed his angle, seeking the spot he knew would send finish her. His roar of triumph echoed off the bedroom's walls seconds later as she cried out, his own pleasure following soon after.

She cuddled closer to Remus, her head on his chest. She had arm wrapped around his waist and a leg thrown over both of his. She knew he was awake, but neither spoke. They didn't want to break the spell of the moment. She smiled when he picked up her hand and gently kissing each finger.

"No rings?" he asked in a husky voice.

She shook her head. She rarely wore jewelry. Her gold hoops she wore the only earrings she took from home when she left. Harry had toyed with the idea of enchanting a couple of medallions for the three of them to wear during the war as a way to keep tabs on each other, but all hell broke out before they could get to it. He mentioned it a few times since, the three of them missing the closeness they once had. Maybe she'd take care of it as a Christmas present.

She forced herself to sit up, if only to better see her mate. She ran her hands down his chest, smiling at the way he sucked in his breath every time she touched him, almost like he

couldn't believe she was his to touch and he was hers. He watched as she traced his scars, her gaze focused as she ran her fingers over the ridges, her touch cool on his warm skin.

"Are you looking for something in particular?"

"I keep expecting to find a tattoo" she confessed.

"I think I'm decorated enough," he said wryly.

"You're telling me Sirius never tried to talk you into it? He never tried to get matching tattoos with the marauders?"

Remus grinned, remembering a Saturday afternoon near Carnaby the spring of their sixth year. Sirius had managed to talk all of them – James, Peter and Remus – into sneaking away from Hogwarts to spend the day among the Muggles. They flirted with pretty girls and got wasted in a pub, James having been banned from uttering Lily's name all day. Sirius wanted to commemorate the adventure permanently, so they followed him to a tattoo parlor, convinced it was just another one of his crazy schemes, and then watched as the first of many was inscribed on his back. Peter had fainted; there was no way he'd ever handle a tattoo and Remus was not going to show his scars to the man in the chair. Only James had consented, getting Lily's name on his left shoulder. Sirius was torn between pride that one of his best friends followed his lead and pity that James was so wrapped up in a woman.

"That smile says a lot, Remus. Where is it?"

He laughed as she bent forward, the ends of her hair tickling his skin as she searched for something that wasn't there. "I don't have one!"

She ignored him. She tried to flip him over. When he wouldn't budge, she moved her hands to his feet and ran her fingers down the soles, laughing as he sat up quickly to tackle her, his own fingers turning her to a hysterical woman in seconds.

"Stop! I'm sorry; stop!"

"I warned you not to think about it," he reminded her with a low growl.

"I forgot!" she gasped.

"Somehow," he whispered, his face close to hers, "I don't believe you."

Despite knowing she'd wiggle out of his grasp as soon as he did, he loosened his grip. He wasn't disappointed. She scrambled out of the bed and stood by its side, her chest heaving as she caught her breath. She grabbed one of the feather pillows. "You do know this means war?"

He nodded.

"I've fought in a war."

Remus grabbed his own pillow. "As have I. Two, actually."

She lowered the pillow with a burst of laughter. "How did we go from the most romantic night of my life to threatening each other with pillows?"

He snagged her arm and tugged until she tumbled into the bed. "That, my love," he murmured as he kissed her lips, "is the beauty that is us."

"I love us, Remus."

"I love us, too."

"Promise me we'll always be us."

He framed her face in his hands. "I waited 36 years for you, Hermione Granger. You were mine and I was yours before you even existed. I promise nothing will keep us apart."

Chapter 22

"Sirius!"

Hermione walked through the front door, having apparated a block away from Grimmauld Place moments before. Heavy footsteps pounded down the stairs in response to her greeting. Sirius jumped over the last three to swoop down the hall and kiss Hermione's cheek.

"Welcome home! Did you have fun? Did you buy me anything? Did you have your way with Remus? Will you give me details because he's no fun?"

"Padfoot," Remus groaned, but Hermione only laughed.

"Yes. Yes. Yes and no!"

Rolling his eyes, Sirius followed the couple to the kitchen. Hermione had several shopping bags balanced in her arms. Recognizing the names of several London book stores, he was suddenly less excited about his present and focused instead on Hermione's left hand. He shrugged when he caught Remus glaring at him.

"Here." She passed over two paperbacks. He looked at the covers and laughed – books two and three of the werewolf romance series he couldn't stop reading.

"Is there something you want to tell me, Padfoot?" Remus asked. Sirius gave him the finger in response.

"Don't listen to him," Hermione said. "Reading is reading, no matter what." She kissed Remus on the cheek and left the kitchen. Both men watched her walk away.

"Would you please stop looking at Hermione's finger?" Remus hissed.

"Can't help it," Sirius replied. "You spent two days planning this amazing date, getting her friends involved and buying new clothes so you can sneak her away ... Sounded like proposal-planning to me."

"I told you," Remus sighed. "It's -"

"Illegal," they both said at the same time.

"Yeah, yeah, so I've heard," Sirius replied sarcastically. "That doesn't mean you can't ask her. You'll be one of those long engagement couples until the asshole politicians get a clue."

"I don't want to get her hopes up."

"I don't know, Moony. If James and Lily taught us anything, it's that life is short and you have to grab your happiness while you can."

"I'm working on it." Remus muttered, rummaging through his own bag of books, smiling at the small sack Hermione must have hidden inside. He peeked inside and found a number of chocolate bars. He automatically handed one to Sirius, hoping the gesture would dissuade him from seeking out the others. It hasn't yet, but he was optimistic.

"How, exactly, are you working on it?" Sirius asked around a mouthful of chocolate.

"I'm going to take Kingsley's offer."

Sirius started choking. "Moony! That's fantastic! Will Hermione be working with you, too?"

"I don't know. I need to talk to her about it. She likes working for Fred and George."

"With," Sirius corrected, an automatic response after enduring her glare when he made the same mistake once last week. All right, more than once. The first time was an accident, the second, third and fourth times ... he couldn't help it. She was fun to tease. "She works *with* them and it's just a part-time gig until something she really wants comes along. She really wants this, Moony; for you and for her."

Remus nodded. He made his decision around dawn. He'd gotten up to get a drink of water and when he walked back to the bed, he saw Hermione lying there, a patch of moonlight illuminating her face. It was the first time in a long time seeing the moon didn't fill him with a sense of forbidding. Instead, he felt acceptance. It was hard to put into words. It was almost as if in that second, everything he had fought against for so long wasn't important. All that mattered was her and she loved him. That was enough. Or it would be once he got the anti-werewolf legislation changed and could legally marry Hermione.

"This is great." Sirius leaned back in his chair with a smirk on his face. "Harry loves his job. You're growing up. Hermione got lucky. I'm proud of all my friends today."

"Please stop talking about my girl's sex life," Remus begged.

"I will if you start talking."

"No."

"Fine. I'll just have to keep imagining things."

Remus shook his head. Why he ever thought an almost 40-year-old Sirius Black would be more mature than a 17-year-old Sirius Black, he'd never know.

"Hey, Harry and Hermione are going out tonight. Feel like going to the pub for a drink?"

Remus didn't look up from the book he was flipping through. "Can't; I'm going, too."

"Going where?"

"Out with Hermione, Harry and Ron."

"What!?" Sirius' chair crashed to the floor. "Why?"

"Because I'm Hermione's. It's supposed to be a triple date or something."

"Not anymore." Harry walked into the kitchen with a disgruntled look. He flopped into a chair with a sigh and snagged the rest of Sirius' chocolate bar. "Ginny just owled. McGonagall won't let her come home."

"You had her ask McGonagall?" Sirius asked. Who was this boy? Had he not learned anything from him?

"Hey, she got permission to come home last weekend for Hermione's birthday," Harry answered defensively.

"Hmm ... date with boyfriend vs. family get-together with the Order," Sirius murmured, two hands held out as if weighing the options. "Wow. I did not see her not coming."

"Shut it, Sirius."

Winking at his godson, Sirius turned to his best friend. "So does this mean the night is off? Remus – you, me, firewhiskey – yeah?"

Remus shrugged, still not completely focused on the conversation.

"He can't," Harry said. "Ron really wants us to meet Rebecca, so we're going. I'll just be a fifth wheel."

"Wait – Rebecca? *The* Rebecca?" Sirius immediately forgot all previous thoughts about an evening at the pub. "The girl I still know nothing about, but apparently is a big deal? I'm in."

"I don't know," Harry hedged. "Ron might not like it."

"Bollocks to Ron; I'm loads of fun!"

"Sirius," Harry hesitated. "Rebecca is a Muggle."

"So?"

"And you're not."

"Neither are you. Or Remus. Or Hermione. Or Ron! Really, Harry, I'm disappointed. Your arguments need more work." Sirius grabbed his books and got up from the table. "What time are we leaving?"

"Six," Harry sighed.

"See you then."

Remus looked up. "Wait; Sirius is coming with us?"

Harry just shook his head.

"No," Ron said. "No. No. No. No."

Hermione and Harry looked at him with what they hoped were innocent expressions.

"No, what?" Harry asked.

"Don't try it, Harry; you know exactly what I'm saying no to." He glared at his best friend. Or former best friend, the traitor.

"Come on, Ron," Hermione pleaded. "He never goes anywhere. The fact that he even wants to leave the house is huge!"

"He wants to make my life hell," Ron retorted.

Hermione struggled to think of a response. She knew Sirius liked Ron, but he also liked to cause trouble, and a setting in which Ron introduces his girlfriend, his *Muggle* girlfriend, to his close friends was too great to ignore.

"If he's coming, I might as well ask Fred and George, too," Ron continued.

"He will not be like Fred and George. I promise."

Ron looked dubious, but he nodded reluctantly. Hermione gave him a hug, and ran out of Harry's room to the study where Remus and Sirius were waiting. Remus was pacing the floor, Sirius sitting on the couch, his legs propped up on the coffee table, an amused expression on his face as he watched Remus.

"Well?" Sirius asked, one eyebrow cocked.

She nodded, but before he could say anything, she held up a finger to cut him off. "There are some rules, Sirius."

"Really?" he asked. "I'm not a child."

Remus snorted.

"Just one," Hermione said in what she hoped was a stern tone. "Please be good. Ron really likes this girl. He's nervous enough dating a Muggle."

Sirius held up his hand. "I solemnly swear I will not deliberately embarrass Ron Weasley."

"Oh God," Hermione groaned.

"Of course," he continued, his glance sliding over to Remus, "I could be persuaded to be on my best behavior if a certain werewolf was willing to share some details of his love life with me."

"Sirius!" Remus and Hermione yelled.

"What?! I know that you blabbed to Ginny, Hermione, just like I know she told you about Harry!"

"What about me?" Harry asked, walking in the room, a pale Ron following.

"Nothing," Hermione replied through gritted teeth.

"Are we ready to go?" Remus asked, desperate to change the subject.

Sirius stood up. "I am."

"Bloody hell," Ron muttered.

They used a public floo to get to Central London. Sirius smiled appreciatively at the girls they passed on the crowded streets on their way to the Trocadero, a popular entertainment center with games, shopping, and movies.

"Rebecca picked it," Ron explained when they got to their destination. "She thought all of us sitting around a restaurant could be uncomfortable."

Any other night and Hermione would agree, but she knew that Ron's experience with Muggle entertainment was sketchy at best. Harry was a little better, having spent most of his life with non-wizards, though his childhood didn't leave much time for play. She was pretty sure Remus had very little experience playing any games and Sirius ... She was already regretting her decision not to confiscate his wand.

"Nervous?" Remus murmured.

"Terrified," she whispered. "This needs to go well. Ron deserves it."

He squeezed her hand in support. "I'll do what I can," he promised.

The group walked inside. The sounds and lights immediately made Remus jump. He didn't like crowds or a lot of noise. His senses were hyper-alert without the extra stimuli. Catching Sirius' eye, he nodded slightly to let him know he was all right. He forced himself to take a few steadying breaths while Ron looked anxiously for Rebecca.

"Ron!" a voice cried, everyone turning to see a tall girl wearing jeans, a plain pink T-shirt under an unbuttoned black and white shirt rush over. Hermione smiled when she saw her hair – long, brown and wavy with red and gold highlights, just like Ron described in vivid detail.

Rebecca threw her arms around Ron and kissed him squarely on the lips before she noticed the people standing behind him. Giggling, she backed up and gave them a friendly smile.

"Hi! I'm Rebecca."

Ron put an arm around the girl's waist, the tense look on his face gave way to a besotted grin. "Rebecca, this is Harry." Harry stepped forward and shook Rebecca's hand, but it was too

loud to catch what he said to her. "And this is Hermione."

Hermione reached to shake her hand, too, but was caught in a quick hug instead.

"I've heard so much about you," Rebecca gushed.

"Likewise."

"This," Ron gestured to Sirius, "is Harry's godfather, Sirius."

Rebecca looked a little confused, like she couldn't understand why Harry would bring his godfather on a triple date, but she covered it well, waving to Sirius. "Sirius, huh? That's not a name you hear every day."

He smiled. "Family name," he replied easily.

"I would imagine," she replied.

"And this is Remus. He's ..." Ron looked at Remus and Hermione, a slightly panicked look on his face. They hadn't discussed what to call Remus. Boyfriend seemed too juvenile and mate; well that was a word that appeared on Ron's "Things we won't talk about" list he made each of them repeat before leaving Grimmauld Place.

It was a fairly long list.

Remus shook Rebecca's hand. "I'm Hermione's," he said smoothly, his confidence in his introduction left no room for question. Hermione smiled at his choice of words. Hers. Every time he said it, her heart did a little dance. She hoped it never stopped.

"It's nice to meet you." Rebecca turned to Ron with a questioning look. "Where's your sister?"

"Ginny couldn't make it," Harry replied.

"Yeah, Professor McGonagall doesn't let students leave Hog –"

Hermione started coughing. Loudly. Remus patted her on the back.

" – school on the weekends that often," Ron finished.

"Wow," Rebecca said. "It sounds like a strict boarding school."

Harry nodded.

"Ron told me he met Harry and Hermione at school, but did you go there, too?" she asked Remus and Sirius.

"We did," Sirius replied. "Before their time, of course. Harry's dad was our best mate."

"That's sweet," Rebecca gave the older men a friendly smile. "So you must have watched Harry grow up."

Everyone was quiet for a moment. Sirius looked guilty. Harry looked sad. Ron looked panicked.

"Um, we were there when he was born, but there were some years in-between when it wasn't possible," Remus finally said.

Rebecca nodded sagely. "It's hard when friends grow apart, isn't it? But hey, you're here now!"

Rebecca led the group away from Trocadero's main entrance. "I took the liberty of making us a reservation for dinner, but we have a couple of hours to kill. Who's up for laser tag?"

"What's laser tag?" Remus whispered.

"You'll love it," Hermione promised.

Surprisingly, he did. Rebecca had booked a group slot, so it was only the six of them in the arena at one time: Harry, Ron, and Rebecca against Hermione, Remus, and Sirius. Harry was still trying to figure out how his team lost.

"Forty-five minutes ago, neither of them had even heard of laser tag." He gestured to Remus and Sirius who were studying their scores on the electronic board with gleeful smiles. "And I know you hadn't had much experience, either."

"Hey," Hermione laughed, hitting his arm. "I happen to be an excellent dueler. Some skills transfer to other things."

Harry rolled his eyes. He was training to be an auror. Ron was training to be an auror. Rebecca was a Muggle. He really though they had the game in the bag. "The fact that two of your teammates have animal-like reflexes didn't hurt either, right?"

"You chose the teams," she reminded him.

They tried bowling next. Hermione had dragged Harry and Ron to a bowling alley years before, so while they certainly weren't good, they were able to fake it well enough. Luckily, Rebecca wasn't that good either, screaming in excitement when she managed to knock down one pin. Remus got the hang of it after Hermione showed him the proper way to hold the ball, though Sirius complained he was playing dumb so she'd have to wrap her arms around him.

"Is that true, Professor Lupin?" Hermione whispered in his ear after he managed a spare.

"Miss Granger. I'm shocked you would have such thoughts."

She smirked and lightly nipped his ear.

"My turn!" Sirius jumped up from his plastic seat.

"He's very enthusiastic, isn't he?" Rebecca asked.

"You have no idea," Ron muttered.

He rolled the ball, his eyes narrowed as he watched it roll down the lane. "Goal!" he yelled.

"What?" Rebecca asked.

"He means strike," Hermione interjected.

"How did he ..." Harry looked at the others for answers, but no one had them. By the end of the game, Sirius' score was the only one in triple digits.

"We should have a bowling alley," he told Remus as they sat down to dinner.

"We can't have a bowling alley," Hermione and Remus replied in tandem.

"Do you all live together?" Rebecca looked intrigued.

Sirius nodded. "Well, the four of us," he said, pointing at Harry to include him, too. "Ron's always welcome, though."

"Thanks, mate," Ron replied, though everyone knows his gratitude was more for Sirius' behavior, not the invitation to live at Grimmauld Place.

"Is it weird, living with three guys?" Rebecca asked Hermione.

"Not really," Hermione replied. "I mean, Harry, Ron and I were in the same house – I mean, dorm – at school, so I'm used to being around them."

"And your parents are OK with it? I mean, with Remus being your boyfriend and everything."

Hermione looked down at her menu, blinking back the tears that always formed when someone mentioned her parents. She felt Remus' hand on her knee and Harry gently nudging her shoulder. "Um, I lost my parents two years ago."

Rebecca blanched. "Oh God. I am *so* sorry. I had no idea."

"No, it's fine -"

"It's my fault." Ron mentally kicked himself for putting Rebecca in an uncomfortable situation and hurting Hermione. "I didn't tell her."

"No, no. It's fine," Hermione repeated, giving the couple a shaky smile. Everyone was quiet for a few minutes, the mood shifting from relaxed to uncomfortable.

"So ... Rebecca," Sirius said. "Do you like magic?"

"How did Ron ever learn to make a rose appear like that?" Rebecca eyes were wide as she waited for Hermione to finish washing her hands.

Hermione kept her head down so Rebecca couldn't see her smile. She knew Ron wanted to kill Sirius when he brought up magic, but then he turned the conversation to magic tricks and ended it with Ron pulling a perfect red rose from behind Rebecca's ear. Judging by the kiss she gave him, Ron was glad Sirius tagged along.

"He's a pretty amazing guy," Hermione agreed.

"You don't have to sell me on him," Rebecca gushed. "I noticed him the first time he and Harry came to the coffee shop. He has this way of looking at everything, like it's so new and shiny, that it makes you see everything in a different way. Does that make sense?"

Hermione nodded.

Rebecca leaned closer, the two of them the only ones in the restaurant bathroom. "Can I tell you something?" Not waiting for Hermione's assent, she pressed forward. "I was pretty nervous about meeting you. I mean, from what Ron told me, you two used to be a bit more than friends."

"Not really," Hermione hedged.

"Oh, I'm not asking for details. Please, no!" she laughed. "I just think it's great that even though it didn't work out, you two are still friends. I mean, who does that in real life?"

"That's true." Hermione opened the bathroom door and gestured for Rebecca to go through first. "Look, one thing you need to know about Ron is he is the most loyal person you'll ever meet. We did not like each other when we first met, but then there was this tro – bully. A real troll of a bully and he wanted to hurt me. Ron and Harry came to my rescue, even though they could have gotten in big trouble, and we've been tight ever since. He isn't perfect and I'm sure he's told you I'd say that, so I'm not going to lie, but he's as loyal as they come."

Rebecca smiled softly. "I really like him," she said. "I think I could ... do you want to hear this?"

Hermione nodded and gestured for Rebecca to continue.

"I think I could love him. Does that sound weird? Is it too soon?"

Hermione looked across the restaurant; her eyes catching Remus'. He slow smile made her feel warm all over. "When it comes to love, there's no such thing as too soon," she replied.

Chapter 23

"That went well," Hermione said as Remus helped her take off her coat.

"Did you have your doubts?" Sirius poked through the pantry shelves, looking for the biscuits he knew Hermione bought earlier that week because he put them on the list.

Harry snorted and took a seat, suddenly exhausted. It wasn't easy trying to pretend to be something you weren't. There were several times he or Ron or Hermione would begin to tell a story, only to realize they couldn't tell it like it happened because of whom it involved or where it took place. Magic was their world. "Would you ever date a Muggle?"

"If I felt a connection, sure." Hermione squeezed Remus' hand when he shot her a look. "Hypothetically, of course."

Sirius rolled his eyes as he sat down and ripped open the package of biscuits. He offered it to Harry before taking a handful. "I don't know. I did a few times in my younger days, but it was more to annoy the family, not because I had actual feelings for the girl."

"Do you think Ron can handle it?" Harry wondered, voicing the question all of them were thinking. Rebecca was a great girl; friendly, enthusiastic and she seemed to truly care about Ron, but whether or not she'd be willing to accept his world ...

Sirius shrugged. "The boy has handled a lot of things over the years. He had to overcome your reputation and Hermione's brains, not to mention all the brothers that came before him. Who knows? Maybe meeting Rebecca and falling for her ... this is his reward. She has no ties to his life up until now and can be 100 percent his."

"He deserves to be happy," Harry glanced over at Hermione and Remus who were sitting at the other end of the table. Hermione was leaning against Remus' shoulder with her eyes closed. "We all do."

"Thank you for my bear," Hermione set the stuffed animal on her dresser. The group had tried their hand at a few carnival games after dinner. Only Remus racked up enough points to win Hermione a prize. It was a rather juvenile moment, he knew that, and yet there was pride in watching her walk around for the rest of the night with the brown bear tucked under her arm.

"Are you going to name it?" he asked from his seat on her bed.

"Of course," she ducked into the bathroom. "I'm just waiting for the right inspiration."

Stifling a yawn, Remus checked the time and winced. No wonder he was exhausted. He kicked off his shoes and shrugged out of his sweater. He had hoped to talk to Hermione about Kingsley's offer that night. Now that he knew that was what he wanted to do, he was

desperate to know her thoughts. He leaned against the headboard and closed his eyes, telling himself he was only going to rest for a second. Hermione found him like that minutes later, having slouched further into the bed, sound asleep. Smiling, she walked over to curl up next to him, forgoing the covers, his body heat giving her all the warmth she needed.

"Do you want to go for a walk?"

Hermione looked up from her book. It was a lazy Sunday afternoon. Everyone in Grimmauld Place had slept in, meeting in the kitchen for a late breakfast before dispersing to different parts of the house. Hermione made a few trips with her things to Remus' room, then got distracted sorting through her books, spreading out on his floor to read.

She stretched, her back a little sore from lying on the hardwood floor, she nodded. "Let me grab my shoes and a jacket."

Minutes later, the couple left the house, Hermione's arm tucked through Remus' as they made their way to the park a few blocks away. The leaves were starting to turn colors and fall, their footsteps making crunching sounds as they walked over the small piles on the sidewalk. "I love autumn, but it's so hard to enjoy the leaves when I know the reason they're turning colors is because they're losing oxygen," Hermione murmured.

"My romantic girl," Remus teased.

"It's not my fault," she cried. "I love the different colors, but once you know why it happens, it makes it difficult to enjoy the changing colors. I look at the leaves and I think I hear them gasping for air."

Remus tried not to laugh, he really did, but her voice was so forlorn, the expression on her face so sad, that he couldn't help it. At first, it was just a snort, but once he started, he couldn't stop; not until Hermione let go of his arm to grab a handful of leaves, throwing them at his face.

"You have three seconds to run," he told her in a low voice.

She took off, her laughter making it difficult to get far before he caught her from behind, swinging her around in circles until she was breathless and both of them were dizzy. Hugging her tightly, he carried her to a bench and sat, keeping her on his lap, his face buried in his neck.

"Remind me to have you on my team when we have our traditional Christmas Eve snowball fight," Hermione murmured.

"We have a traditional Christmas Eve snowball fight?"

"I'm going to start one," she said decisively. They were a couple. Couples had traditions. "You're on my team."

"Done."

Sliding off his lap, Hermione shifted until she was sitting on the bench, facing him. "What do you want to tell me?"

He was surprised. "How do you know I want to tell you something?"

She laughed. "Oh, I don't know ... some magical cosmic connection I share with you makes it easy to read you. It's the strangest thing."

He leaned over to kiss the tip of her nose. "Sirius' sarcasm is rubbing off on you."

"He'd tell me to tell you thank you."

He shook his head, knowing she was right. There were times he wondered if he and Hermione should look into a place of their own. Sirius did better when he had people around him – he knew that and didn't want to leave his friend alone – but shouldn't he and Hermione have their own space?

He'd worried about it for a few weeks, but then he'd come across his best friend and his love laughing over something in the kitchen, arguing over a game of Wizard's Chess or Hermione reading a book while Sirius napped with his feet in her lap. The way they lived, no matter how untraditional, worked for them. The three of them had abandonment issues. They needed each other to feel complete. Remus had worried that would change after he claimed Hermione, that suddenly he'd be jealous of the closeness his best friend and his mate shared, but Sirius' support over the years, his dedication to keeping Hermione safe when Remus couldn't, cemented their own bond. If anything ever happened to him, Sirius would take care of Hermione and she'd watch over him.

"Remus?" Hermione had a quizzical look on her face.

He took her hand, lacing his fingers through hers. "I've been thinking about Kingsley's offer, working with the Ministry to eradicate the anti-werewolf legislation, and ... I want to take it."

Her face lit up. "Really?"

"Yes and, if you're interested, I'd love for you to join me. But if you are happy with what you're doing, I don't want you to leave it. I don't ever want you to feel that you have to set aside your happiness for me and or that I'm telling you what to do -"

She leaned over to kiss him. "Sometimes, Remus, you talk too much."

"That's the first time anyone has ever said that to me."

"When does the new venture start?" Sirius asked.

Remus looked across the table at his friend, acknowledging his proud smile with a nod of his head. It was dinner time and, taking advantage of the fact that everyone was home for once, Hermione had prepared a feast, the four of them dining on roast chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans – she insisted everyone have at least one serving – and cornbread stuffing.

"I'll owl Kingsley in the morning," Remus said.

"And I'll give the twins a heads up when I go to the shop," Hermione added.

Harry was thrilled with the latest development. Delores Umbridge was a horrible woman who helped make Remus' life miserable after he graduated from Hogwarts. Knowing Remus and Hermione would be the ones to change everything she'd done ... it was even better than the night she was carried off by the centaurs. He opened his mouth to say so, but was cut off by the green light in the fireplace, Ron walking through a second later.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said in lieu of a proper greeting. "Harry, Hermione; I need to talk to you."

He walked out of the kitchen, not stopping to grab a bite to eat. That in itself was unusual. Harry was out of his chair seconds later, following Ron down the hall. Hermione mouthed "Sorry" to Remus and followed.

"Do you ever look at them and see us and James?" Sirius asked Remus.

"All the time."

"Fate is a funny thing." Sirius put his serving of green beans back in the bowl. Hermione would never know.

Ron threw himself on Harry's bed. "I love her."

Hermione and Harry joined him, each of them taking the spots they had claimed as theirs over the years. Hermione liked to lie on her back, her legs propped up against the wall, head near the foot of the bed, while Harry sat on the opposite side, his back against the headboard, his legs stretched out. Ron always sprawled on the foot of the bed, his head near Hermione's, whether he was the one in crisis or not.

"After you guys left, we went back to her place -"

"No details!" Hermione and Harry yelled.

"– and we talked! Perverts. We spent all night talking, OK and snogging a little, and it was amazing. We ... we connected," he sighed despondently. "She's the one. I love her."

"Usually when someone is in love, Ron, it's a happy occasion," Hermione told her friend.

"I'm going to play devil's advocate and disagree," Harry jumped in. "Remember what I was like when I realized my feelings for Ginny? Or how I reacted when I learned about you and Remus?"

"You're a mess when it comes to love, Harry." Hermione patted him on the arm. "That doesn't mean Ron has to follow in your footsteps."

"What do I do?" Ron cried. "She loved you guys!"

"Um, is that bad?" Harry asked.

"No! That's great! I don't know what I would have done if she hadn't, but now she wants me to meet her friends, and then she wants to meet my family and have mine meet hers. I can't take her to the Burrow! She'll take one look and run screaming the other way!"

"What if you and your parents met for lunch in London?" Hermione suggested, knowing the second she said it that that would be even worse. Judging by the sour look Ron shot her, he agreed.

"You're going to have to tell her, Ron," Harry said. "You can't keep something like this from her."

"What if she doesn't believe me?"

"Then she's not the right person for you," Hermione replied.

"What if she can't handle it?"

"Then she's not the right person for you," Harry repeated.

"What if she wants proof?"

"You're a wizard, Ron," Hermione laughed. "You give her proof."

The three of them were quiet, comfortable in the fact that they were together. Hermione reached one hand above her head to ruffle Ron's hair.

"You know," Harry said. "Maybe you want to talk to your parents first. They probably know someone who has fallen in love with a Muggle. Their advice could be better than ours."

"That's true," Hermione said. "I mean, Harry's dating your sister. He didn't have to struggle much to make that happen."

Harry nudged Hermione's leg with his shoulder. "You're one to talk, Ms. Fate-Decided-For-Me."

Ron groaned. "Why do I always have to be the one to do things the hard way?"

Chapter 24

Four months later

Remus walked into Kingsley Shacklebolt's office with the beginning of a headache behind his eyes. It was the first time Kingsley asked to only see him, not him and Hermione. He didn't have anything new to report, so that could only mean one thing: bad news.

The look on the minister's face when he gestured for Remus to sit down confirmed it.

"Remus," the wizard sighed, rubbing his eyes in frustration.

"No one said fixing decades of corruption was going to be easy," Remus replied, feeling better when Kingsley gave a small half smile, the gesture making his dark eyes brighten a little.

"There are times I wish I could bottle Hermione's passion and let it loose on everyone in this building who still subscribes to the pureblood way of thinking."

Remus smiled. As someone often on the listening end of Hermione's tirades, he agreed that they were entertaining. Of course, when her piles of research and well-thought and executed speeches did little to dissuade those in power ... He could see her frustration, feel it. Neither one of them expected that when they accepted their positions within the Ministry's Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures that decades of prejudice would be erased within weeks, but several months in and all they have to show for their work were a lot of meetings and several scathing opinions in *The Daily Prophet*; particularly when the nature of Remus Lupin's relationship with Hermione Granger was made public.

"Ignore it," Hermione had said. "They don't understand."

"I did this to you. You don't deserve to be labeled a -"

"Don't repeat it," she interrupted. "Don't give the words power."

That was two months ago. There were still people that gave the couple looks, muttered comments he overheard, but Arthur Weasley was right when he said the people who knew and care about the couple would be accepting.

"Remus?"

"Sorry." He forced himself to stay focused on the present. "I completely understand everything is moving slower than either of us likes. I assume you have an idea, one that Hermione won't like, which is why you scheduled this meeting when you know she's at Hogwarts."

Kingsley smiled wryly. "You know me well, Remus."

Remus sighed. "I'm afraid I do."

She was at her desk when he returned to their shared office, a pile of books on the corner, her head down as she scribbled notes. She had exhausted the research materials at the Ministry, even visiting those in Bulgaria and Germany to see if they had information related to werewolves that the British Ministry did not. Her recent trip to Hogwarts was more getaway than research-driven; she needed to see Ginny and have a few hours to laugh with her friends. Sometimes it was easy for Remus to forget she was still only 19; she'd done so much, experienced so much, already.

"You're back." He placed a kiss on the top of her head.

She nodded, but didn't reply, quill flying as she finished a thought. Once she did, she stood up and wrapped her arms around Remus, breathing in the scent of him after several hours apart. "How was your meeting with Kingsley?"

"How did you know?"

She simply smiled. The bond between the two of them was strong – and continued to increase in strength every day. They couldn't read each other's thoughts, something both of them were grateful for, but they had instincts about the other that were eerily accurate.

Using his wand to close and lock their office door, Remus sat at his desk, pulled Hermione into his lap and wrapped his arms around her.

"We're not going to have another round of the professor and the student, are we?" Hermione's lips were pursed in a pout. That little game on top of his desk one late night took care of one of the fantasies she had about him when she was younger, although the real version was a lot wilder than what her 14-year-old self had imagined.

Remus ran a hand up and down her spine, completely focused on her – her scent, the way she felt in his arms – and reminded himself she was the reason he was doing this. He had listened to Kingsley, argued with him, debated, and then reluctantly agreed there was no other way. "Kingsley wants me to go on a reconnaissance mission." He flinched when he felt Hermione stiffen. "I'm only one person; I can't speak for all werewolves. He feels if we had more packs on our side, pledging allegiance to the Ministry, it will help convince others that dropping the current laws won't result in packs overthrowing the current leadership."

Hermione buried her face in Remus' chest. She could feel tears forming in her eyes and she didn't want him to see them. "The last time you traveled with different packs, you were almost killed," she said quietly.

"That was different," he replied. "I was recruiting for war. This is ... it's more of a peace offering."

"You're seen as a traitor among some werewolves, Remus."

"And a friend among others."

She leaned back slightly so she could look him in the eye. "You've already had this conversation with Kingsley, haven't you? Anything I say you've already said and you are using his words as your response."

He nodded, making her sigh. "How long will you be gone?"

"I don't know. It's winter; that makes it harder to track packs."

"So wait until spring."

"Hermione, no one will change their mind between now and spring." Remus tightened his grip when she tried to move from his lap. Taking her chin in his hand, he forced her look at him. "Delaying this means delaying everything else. If we don't start making progress soon, the public will get tired of the conversation and move on to something else. We can't lose the support we've gained."

She sometimes hated how logical he could be. "I can't go with you, can I?"

He shook his head. "It's too dangerous – too dangerous for a non-werewolf," he added quickly.

"But -"

"No 'buts.' You are a witch, Hermione, not a werewolf -- and you're my mate. If we came across a pack that wasn't receptive to what we're trying to do, the fact that you're mine could put you in danger," he leaned his forehead against hers, willed her to understand. "I can't focus on what I have to do if I'm worried about you. It will leave both of us vulnerable."

"I hate this."

"I hate it, too."

Bill Weasley sat at the table, his fingers tapping in a steady rhythm he wasn't aware of as he waited for Remus to come downstairs. He had kissed his own wife and daughter good bye an hour ago and was eager to get going so he'd be that much closer to returning home. He had reached out to Remus when his parents mentioned his mission, offering his services; a move that led to plenty of arguments at the Burrow and his own home, but he was resolute in his decision. Remus had helped him over the years and Hermione ... she was practically his sister. If he could do something for the couple, he would.

"I appreciate this, Bill," Sirius' gaze was steady as he focused on the red-haired wizard. "Hermione ... she still hates this, but she's taking it a little better knowing you'll be with him."

Bill shrugged. "Life has been pretty quiet, you know? It was time to shake things up a bit."

Sirius laughed, but it was hollow. He'd struggled to remain upbeat ever since Remus announced his plans. The past two weeks weren't as bad as his time in Azkaban, but they were close.

He heard footsteps on the stairs. Harry was already at the Ministry, organizing the aurors that would serve as a convoy to the travelers – from a distance, of course. Getting to his feet, he plastered a jubilant look on his face and clasped Remus on the back when he entered the kitchen. "Good man!" he cried, grabbing his friend in a fierce hug. "Always knew you'd be the one to fight for the greater good."

Remus tried to think of a witty retort, but he couldn't. He'd spent the past few hours wrapped up in Hermione, the two of them pretending everything was fine, would be fine, and that he'd be back in a few weeks, two months tops. Neither one had spent more than a day away from each other since he claimed her nearly six months ago. They didn't know what the separation would feel like. If the anxiety he felt after a few hours apart was any indication, it was going to be hell.

"Take care of her," he whispered fiercely in Sirius' ear.

"Promise," he replied.

Hermione hugged Bill, whispering something Remus couldn't catch, but assumed it was along the same lines as what he told Sirius. Then she turned to him, chin lifted proudly despite the unshed tears in her eyes. "You better come back safely, Remus Lupin," she threatened. "I mean it."

Pulling her into his arms, he buried his face in her curls. "I already promised, remember? We're us. We'll always be us."

She nodded, the lump in her throat making it impossible to reply. Pulling back, he framed her face with his hands and looked into her eyes. "I love you."

"I love you."

He kissed her softly on the lips. "I'm going to ask you a question when I get home."

She smiled. "I know."

One more kiss and then he walked to the fireplace, turning to look at Hermione and Sirius before stepping inside. "The Ministry of Magic," he said in a strong voice.

Then he was gone.

They stood there, the mate and the animagus, neither one wanting to say the first word. Hermione took a deep breath and turned to leave, stopping only when Sirius' hand grabbed her arm. Letting the façade drop, she let herself be folded into his arms as she cried.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

I remember this is where I felt I started to lose the thread of the story, so updates will slow down as I edit the remaining 14 chapters to make things better.

Thank you to everyone for reading and commenting! I forgot how much I loved this story. I think it's my favorite.

Don't tell the others, OK?

Hermione eyed the potion, the very first batch of Wolfsbane created entirely by her. She couldn't remember the last time she was this nervous as she watched Professor Slughorn study it. She waited, a bit impatient, as the self-important man sniffed it, then held it to the light. He opened his mouth. She held her breath. The portly man stood up and gave her a smile

"Well done, Miss Granger."

Remus had been gone for four weeks. At first, Hermione tried to maintain her usual routine, but she couldn't work on her office without Remus. Storming into Kingsley's office, she told him there was no more research she could do, no more questions she could answer about the behavior of werewolves until her werewolf came home. When he agreed with her, she took advantage of the guilt he had for sending Remus away and requested support for a new project – the mass market of Wolfsbane portion.

Werewolves, like animagi, are required to register with the Ministry. Hermione proposed that when the werewolves register, they receive a free lifetime supply of Wolfsbane, which would alleviate the public's fears of attacks during the full moon. The proposal was met with support from the Wizengamot and the werewolves who have registered. Now Hermione's focus was on having enough of the potion on hand -- but she wasn't stopping there.

"Tell me again what you want to do." Slughorn sat at his desk with a cup of tea and a biscuit.

Hermione took out the parchment that outlined her plan, handing a copy to her former potions professor. "I want to strengthen the potion so that a person only needs to take it once to be protected for a full year." She said nothing as he skimmed the proposal, his eyebrows going up several times. She didn't have much affection for Slughorn. The man cared too much about reputations, collecting students with potential only to better himself, but even she could admit he knew his potions. Having him on her side would only strengthen her case.

"I'm sure you know, Miss Granger, that this potion is foul. To increase its strength to make what you're suggesting possible ... I don't think there's a man or woman strong enough to drink it."

"But what if we inject it?"

She got the idea from Ron's Rebecca. She may work at a coffee shop, but only to pay the bills while she attends university. Rebecca planned on becoming a doctor. Hermione loved talking to her about her studies and thought perhaps it was time the wizard world and the Muggle world came together for the greater good.

Slughorn nodded thoughtfully. "That could work," he said. "Of course, you'd need several people willing to test it over several months before you could consider offering it on a grander scale."

"Unfortunately, professor, I have nothing but time."

He nodded sadly. "Do you hear from him often?"

She shook her head. Secrecy was key for this mission – to protect Remus and Bill, and the werewolves who did not want to be discovered – so regular communication wasn't an option. A few of the werewolves who have traveled to the Ministry to register in support of the proposed laws passed along messages from Remus to Hermione; her sole link to her mate.

"He would be proud of what you're doing, Miss Granger." Slughorn sounded so much like Dumbledore that Hermione expected to see the beloved wizard smiling at her over his half-moon glasses.

She hoped he was right.

"Hermione, love, you need to stop sleeping in here."

She looked up from her makeshift bed on the couch in the nearly-empty study. True to his word, Sirius had transformed his third floor bedroom into a separate living area for Hermione and Remus. He moved the library up there, too, but had yet to figure out what to do with the study, letting it become sort of a catchall for unneeded furniture while he waited for inspiration.

That's what he told Hermione and Harry, anyway. She knew the truth was that he lost enthusiasm for the project.

"I can't sleep in my room, Sirius."

"Why not?"

"It doesn't smell like him anymore. His scent is gone. It's like he was never there and I can't ..." She sucked in her breath. She was *not* going to lose it. She couldn't. She needed to stay

strong, keep moving. He would be home soon. He had to be. He promised. "I just can't."

Sirius nodded and moved into the room, lifting Hermione's feet so he could join her on the couch. "OK," he said soothingly. "Sleep here. I'll stay here until you do."

She snuggled deeper in the couch. "I know you wait in the kitchen every night until I fall asleep."

He looked resigned. "Yeah?"

She nodded.

"You should have said something sooner. I'm an old man, love. The couch is kinder on my back."

She snorted. She was quiet for so long, he figured she was asleep, but then she spoke. "Remus' birthday is Tuesday."

Sirius nodded. He would turn 40. When Sirius celebrated his birthday a few months ago, he insisted on a blowout, dragging everyone to London for pizza and bowling. Remus, no doubt, would prefer a smaller celebration. "If he was here, what do you think he would want to do?"

Hermione thought carefully. "He'd keep it low-key. Maybe a nice dinner out, but he'd probably prefer close friends and dinner at home."

"And chocolate cake."

She smiled. "Of course chocolate cake."

"We're going to bake one for him, right?"

"I already bought what we need."

Sirius nodded, his hands petting Hermione's feet absently, his thoughts on Remus. Forty. His best friend was going to be 40. *He* was 40. He didn't feel 40 – most days. Granted, the past few weeks have been tough, but he was sure he could still handle whatever life threw at him. He knew Remus could. He was counting on it. "What would you get him for a present?"

"Is that your not-so-subtle-way of asking about our sex life?"

He laughed. "Always."

She sat up, no longer sleepy; not that she was surprised. She hadn't had a full night's sleep in weeks and refused to take a potion. She needed to stay sharp. "I had an idea, but I need your help with it."

"Go on."

"Remus said the four of you -"

"Three of us," Sirius interrupted coldly.

"Three of you," Hermione amended. "He said the three of you left once Hogwarts to spend a day in London, drinking, flirting ..."

"We did that more than once, actually."

"Well, he only told me about the one time."

"Mate's code, love. Continue."

"It must have been the first time you ditched school because Remus you and James got tattoos to commemorate the event."

Sirius grinned. His face looked less strained. "That we did."

"I think ... I think I want to get a tattoo. For Remus."

Sirius' eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Really?"

She nodded.

"OK. When will we go?"

"Tuesday. On his birthday."

Hermione leaned forward in the chair. Her hands were folded in front of her, the back of her shirt shifted so her left shoulder was on display. She looked perfectly calm; that is unless you looked closely at her knuckles which were white from tension.

"I can't believe you're doing this," Harry told her.

"You're next," she reminded him.

He nodded and turned another page through the book of images. He had no idea what he wanted. The outing was originally going to be just Hermione and Sirius, but once Harry heard about it, he asked if he and Ron could come along. Sirius said only if they promised to get tattoos, too.

"Ready?" the man asked.

Hermione nodded. She heard the needle before she felt it, jumping slightly when it first touched her skin.

"Does it hurt?" Ron asked, eyes wide as he watched the needle.

"It's not the most pleasant thing in the world." Sirius placed his hand on top of Hermione's in show of support. "Believe me, the three of you have been through worse."

Hermione focused on Sirius, her eyes drawn to the white bandage on his collarbone. He'd gotten a tattoo of the moon for Remus and Moony, his faith in the werewolf to keep the man safe. Hermione was getting a moonflower on her left shoulder blade. Ron chose a Jack Russell terrier; his Patronus.

"Remus taught Harry the Patronus Charm and Harry taught me," Ron explained. "It seems fitting."

"It's good," Sirius agreed.

Harry closed the book. "If you don't mind, Sirius, I want to get the moon, too – but on my shoulder. It's for Remus, but it matches yours and, I don't know, it makes me think of my dad, too. That's where he had his tattoo, right?"

Sirius nodded. "He'd like that. They both would."

"I wonder what Remus will get when he gets back," Ron mused.

Hermione could have kissed him. *When* he gets back; not *it*. Instead, she closed her eyes and wished with all her might that somewhere, Remus knew his friends were thinking about him.

Happy birthday, love.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"It's time."

Hermione looked up from her bowl of oatmeal. She wasn't eating it. She stopped after three bites. Instead, she was pushing the cooked oats around the bowl with her spoon. Remus refused to eat oatmeal unless she added chocolate ships.

They haven't had chocolate chips in the house since Remus left three months ago.

"Time for what?" Harry tore his gaze from Hermione to focus on Ron.

Ron ran a hand down Hermione's hair before he took the chair next to hers. He snagged her orange juice. The casualness of his gesture did more to ease her more than Harry and Sirius' constant hovering. She took another bite of her breakfast, then plucked her orange juice out of Ron's hand and finished it.

"I'm telling Rebecca," Ron said. "I'm telling her I'm a wizard."

He waited for his friends' reaction. Nothing.

"Hello?" He waved his arms. "Didn't you hear me? I'm telling Rebecca I'm a wizard!"

"No offense, Ron, but you've been saying that for months," Harry said.

Ron shrugged. What Harry said was true. He'd announce he was going to tell her, but then something would come up and he'd lose his nerve. She knew he was keeping something from her and that fact that she didn't push him was simply another reason to love her. He knew he couldn't hide who he was forever. He didn't want to risk not telling her. He saw how Hermione withered away the longer Remus was gone ... fear wasn't worth that. She took a chance for the person she loved. He was going to do the same.

Plus, he told himself, perhaps the event would keep Hermione's mind occupied for a day. She'd either celebrate with him or comfort him after.

He really hoped they'd be celebrating.

"We're meeting her at Hyde Park in an hour," Ron said.

"We?" Hermione tuned into the conversation for the first time.

"Do you honestly think I'm doing this alone?" Ron looked at Hermione like she was crazy. "Go! Go shower, get dressed, do whatever you need to do and be back here in 45 minutes."

She looked at Harry. He shrugged. It's not like they had any other plans.

"Go!" Ron yelled.

Hermione walked to her makeshift bedroom in the study, grabbed some clothes and went to Harry's bathroom on the second floor to do everything Ron had told her to do.

"Are you going out?" Sirius called out.

She pushed his bedroom door open and peeked inside. He was sitting up in bed, the newspaper on his lap. "Ron swears today is the day he's telling Rebecca," she replied.

Sirius nodded. "Who picked this month?"

"George."

"Damn him."

Maybe it wasn't supportive to have a wager on when their friend was going to admit his secret to his girlfriend of nearly a year, but it was a long winter and the twins' betting pool helped everyone keep their minds off more serious matters – for a little bit, at least.

"Do you want to come?" Hermione asked even though she knew he'd refuse. Sirius had not left the house in Remus' absence, convinced that if a person was not available at all times, they'd miss communication from him. When someone else would offer to stay, he'd tell them they wouldn't know what to do if Remus contacted them. Sighing when he shook his head, she promised to bring back dinner and continued down the hallway to the stairs, telling herself that today she'd think about Ron.

Remus would understand.

Hermione and Harry sat on a park bench several feet from Ron, who was sitting on a bench of his own. The redhead was hunched over, arms on his knees, head in his hands.

"He looks sick," Harry commented.

"He's nervous," Hermione chided.

"No, he looks like he did fifth year when we told him he couldn't quit Quidditch."

Hermione rolled her eyes. It always came back to Quidditch.

"I really hope we don't have to mend a broken heart today," Harry continued.

Hermione nodded in agreement.

"How's your heart?" Harry asked quietly.

Hermione smiled shakily. It had been almost three weeks since the last werewolf with news about Remus arrived at the Ministry. According to her, Vanessa, Remus and Bill were well and healthy. Hermione could only hope that the lack of communication since then meant that the pair was nearing the end of their mission, a prospect she timidly shared with Harry. "The number of werewolves coming to the Ministry has fallen significantly. That has to mean something, right?"

Harry nodded as he took Hermione's hand. They sat there, huddled together in the cool April air, watching as Rebecca approached Ron, an expectant smile on her face.

"Here we go," Harry said.

"Ron!" Rebecca jogged the last few feet to Ron and threw her herself at him. She pressed her lips against his, smiling when she felt his arms wrap tightly around her. She loved when he did that, when he'd hold on to her as if he was afraid to let go. It made her feel adored, nearly precious.

"I love you." He pulled back and stared at her intently. "You know that, right?"

She grinned. "Of course I do, silly. I love you, too!"

He nodded and, taking her hand, led her to the bench. Sitting so they were turned towards each other, knees touching, he tightened his grip on her hands momentarily, his face serious. She opened her mouth to ask him what was wrong, but then he spoke.

"You know me, Rebecca. You know I grew up the youngest boy in a family of overachievers. You know I'm friends with Harry who has this amazing reputation that's hard to overcome. And Hermione ... no one matches her intelligence. I love my family and my friends, but sometimes I feel like I've spent most of my life looking for something that's just mine, you know? When I met you, I found it. You didn't know me as another Weasley or Harry Potter's best friend; you only knew me as Ron and, strangely enough, fell in love with me anyway," he said wryly. "I want you to meet my family. I want to show you off to everyone I know. I want the whole world to say our names together – Rebecca and Ron, Ron and Rebecca."

She squeezed his hand. She loved this man. "I want that, too."

He took a deep breath. It was now or never. "I'm a wizard."

She didn't react, so he said it again.

"I'm a wizard, Rebecca."

"No ..." she said in a comforting voice. "You're a Weasley."

"No, I'm a wizard! I have magical powers! I grew up in a wizarding family, which is why I've been scared to introduce you to everyone. They can't act like muggles; you'd know in five seconds something was off!"

"Muggles?"

"Non-magic folks, like you."

Rebecca stared at her boyfriend, her love, and burst out laughing. "Ronald Weasley, you are hilarious! Is this a joke? Who's in on it? Harry? Sirius? Where are they?" She looked around the park.

"Rebecca, this isn't a joke," Ron continued, his voice almost pleading. "I am a wizard! I attended Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. I'm an auror in the Department of Ministries, where I work to track down dark wizards. My dad and one of my brothers work in the Ministry, too. My oldest brother is a curse breaker, the second-oldest works with dragons. Fred and George own a joke shop in Diagon Alley. Ginny will graduate from Hogwarts next month," Ron spoke quickly, unable to stop as Rebecca just stared at him, her eyes wide with shock. "Harry! Harry is an auror, too, and Hermione works in the Ministry, helping eradicate anti-werewolf legislation. Sirius is a wizard. Remus is, too – and a werewolf, but that'll take longer to explain. He won't hurt you, though, so don't act different when you see him next. My mum, she doesn't work outside the home, hard to even think about it with seven kids, but she ..."

Rebecca listened to the words that poured from Ron's lips. She could tell he believed everything he was saying. Oh God. She fell in love with a nutter.

"Stop it!" She jumped to her feet. "If you don't want to be with me anymore, Ronald Weasley, at least have the decency to break things off like a real man. Do not make me break up with you by spinning some nonsense."

Ron stood up, too. "I'm not lying! Rebecca -"

"Right." Rebecca turned to stomp off, almost crashing into Harry and Hermione. "What?" she yelled. "Are you here to back up his delusions? My God, Ron, you really did think of everything, didn't you?"

"Rebecca ..."

Hermione didn't speak. Instead, she took Rebecca's arm and pulled her deep into the trees, away from the prying eyes of strangers. She waited for the boys to join them, then cast a silencing charm for good measure. "I know this sounds insane -" she began.

"Hermione, don't make me not like you," Rebecca interrupted.

" - but it's true. I found out I was a witch when I was 11, when I got my acceptance letter to Hogwarts. So did, Harry. We didn't grow up in magical families like Ron, so it was new to us."

"And you just went to this magical boarding school?" Rebecca scoffed.

"Yes. And it changed my life."

Rebecca rolled her eyes. She should have paid closer attention in her abnormal psychology class. If she had, she'd know how to deal with three people insisting they were magical.

"I don't blame you for not believing us," Hermione said. "But let us prove it. Please?"

Rebecca sighed and waved her hand in a 'Go ahead' gesture. Harry took out his wand, said a spell, and placed a dozen long-stemmed red roses in Rebecca's arms.

"That's just one of Ron's magic tricks," Rebecca muttered. She refused to be charmed or amazed by the gesture.

"OK." Hermione raised her wand, cast a spell. The birds above them were no longer randomly chirping, but singing Tony Bennett's *The Way You Look Tonight*.

Rebecca was a sucker for old music. She never told Hermione that. "How did you ..."

"Ron," Hermione nudged.

He took his wand, pointed it at nothing and muttered a spell. Seconds later, two dozen butterflies appeared, which was enchanting enough, but then they flew together to create the shape of a heart.

"Ohmigod." Rebecca sat on the ground. Hard. Ron kneeled before her.

"Are you OK?"

"You're a wizard," she said in an awed voice.

He nodded.

"Your friends are wizards.

"And witches," Ron told her. "Females are witches."

"Of course," Rebecca whispered. "That makes sense." She looked at the butterflies. The birds. The flowers. "Your family is magical?"

"Yes," Ron nodded.

"Oh God." She lifted a shaking hand to his face. She lightly traced his nose, eyes and cheekbones with her fingertips. He smiled at her, though his eyes were wary. He looked ... he looked how he always looked. Her Ron. Her love. "Can we be together?" she whispered. "Can a wizard and a -- what's the word?"

"Muggle."

"Right, muggle. Are we even allowed to be together?"

Ron swallowed nervously. "It's not ideal in our world, but it happens – and laws are changing so that when it does, it's better for everyone. But, honestly, I wouldn't care if it was illegal

because I love you and I would walk away from everything if that's what I had to do to be with you. In fact ..."

She stared as he dug in his pocket, bringing out a small black box. She looked up at Harry and Hermione. Both looked shocked.

"Rebecca Ayrn." Ron's voice was calm and steady; he'd never felt more sure about anything. "Will you marry me?"

"I can't believe it." Hermione exited the fireplace. "I can't believe it!"

"I know," Harry replied, a step behind her. "You've been saying that since we left the park."

"It's just so ... unbelievable! Ron! *Our* Ron is getting married. I can't believe it."

Harry rolled his eyes, but he knew what Hermione meant. He had no idea his friend was that serious about Rebecca. He knew he loved her. He knew he wanted to share his secret, but he figured they had another year *at least* before Ron'd even think about marriage.

"Sirius!" Hermione yelled. "Sirius, come down here! We have something to tell you!"

Hermione bounced on the balls of her feet as she filled the teakettle. Her best friend was getting married! She got to play witness as two people she cared about took the first step in a lifetime commitment. It was amazingly beautiful. Her heart felt full. Everything was going to be all right; she knew it.

"Hermione?"

She turned to the man standing in the doorway. "Sirius! You will not believe what happened! Ron asked Rebecca to marry him!"

He didn't react.

"Sirius. Did you hear me?" She walked toward him. His face was pale. His eyes were hollow. "What is it? What happened?"

"Bill ..."

"Bill? What about Bill!? Is he OK?"

"Bill ... he was found ... at St. Mungo's ..."

"He's at St. Mungo's? Is he going to be OK?" There was a bubble of hysteria clawing at her throat.

"They think so."

"Let's go. We've got to go now!" She flicked the stove off with her wand. Coat. Her coat. She needed her coat. Remus always joked that she never left it in the same place twice. No, don't think about Remus. Where the hell was her coat?!

"Hermione ... Remus ..."

She stopped. No. She didn't want to hear this. She wanted to focus on Bill. She had to focus on Bill. If she focused on Bill, she couldn't worry about Remus. He was fine. He had to be.

"What about Remus, Sirius?" Harry asked quietly.

"He's missing."

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry. Don't hate me.

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Confession: I totally forgot the twist in this chapter. My brain used to write plot twists. I miss that.

He's missing.

He's missing. He's missing. He's missing.

Hermione couldn't stop repeating the words in her head.

He's missing. He's missing. He's missing.

Ten letters. Three syllables. Two words.

She loved words. She'd always loved words. The day she figured out that letters made words and words made stories and stories led to information - it opened her world. She valued words, revered them. She never imagined they could be used against her. That they could destroy her.

"Hermione?"

She didn't hear Sirius over the roar in her ears.

He's missing. He's missing. He's missing.

She leaned against the wall. She would be strong. She had to be strong, but her legs couldn't hold her. She slid to the floor. She brought her knees to her chest, desperate to hide from the world, the words; the fear that everything she had was gone.

He's missing. He's missing. He's missing.

Sirius sat beside her. They were in the hallway at St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, waiting for news about Bill. The entire Weasley clan, plus Rebecca and Harry, were in the waiting room. Hermione couldn't be there. She couldn't face Fleur, or Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. This was her fault, all her fault. She backed Bill up when he offered to help Remus. She told Remus she'd feel better if Bill went with him. She put Bill in harm's way and now Remus was paying for it.

He's missing. He's missing. He's missing.

"Bill's going to be fine, Hermione." Sirius' tone was soothing. That wasn't right. Sirius wasn't supposed to be soothing. Sirius was brisk. Abrupt. Sarcastic. Remus was soothing. Oh God, *Remus*.

He's missing. He's missing. He's missing.

"The healers said a few days rest and he can go home."

He's missing. He's missing. He's missing.

"We'll get to see him in a little bit. He'll us about Remus."

He's missing. He's missing. He's missing.

"Hermione? Hermione, don't do this," Sirius' voice broke. He couldn't lose her; he couldn't. He made a promise to take care of her. He was going to keep that promise. He had to keep this promise. He couldn't break another one. "Please. You need to stay here with me, OK? Stay with me."

She wasn't going anywhere. She was stuck here. Stuck. Without Remus. Where was he? He would know what to say, what to do. Where was he? She felt Sirius hand on hers. She gripped it. Tight. She needed to hold on to something.

"Hermione. Sirius."

Sirius looked up at Kingsley Shacklebolt. He was wearing his usual purple robes; his gold earring twinkled in his ear. Usually so tall and imposing, he looked exhausted. That scared Hermione even more.

"Bill's awake. He wants to see Hermione."

"Hermione." Sirius gently nudged her shoulder with his. "Love, we need to go."

She didn't react, but when he stood up, she did, too, her grip on his hand still tight as they walked into Bill's room. Several redheads crowded the small space. There was sniffing, the shuffling of feet as Hermione stepped inside. She brought her face up to look at Fleur. Without a word, the blond woman walked to Hermione and wrapped her arms around her, squeezing tightly.

"Eez not your fault," Fleur whispered fiercely. "Do not feel guilty."

She kissed Hermione on both cheeks and returned to her husband's side. She took one of his hands in both of hers. Hermione squashed the bubble of jealousy that rose at the gesture. Why did she get to hold his hand? Why did she get to sit on his bed and smile at him? Why will she get to lecture him about rest and potions, maybe even get upset about the work that went into caring for him as he healed? It wasn't fair. None of this was fair!

"... we didn't see him coming," Bill was saying. "We had no warning, no scent, but it wasn't an accident. He was looking for us."

"Who?" Kingsley asked.

"Fenrir Greyback."

Hermione's head snapped up. "That can't be," she whispered.

"It was him, Hermione." Bill unconsciously touched the scars on his cheek. "He's not someone you forget."

"But he's dead," she whispered. "At Hogwarts ... the battle ... Ron and Neville dueled ... he lost ... we were told he was dead."

"Presumed dead," Kingsley said. "We never found a body, so we weren't 100 percent."

"WHAT?"

Everyone jumped at Hermione's shout.

"You sent Remus out there when you knew there was a chance Fenrir Greyback was still alive?! Do you know the hatred he has for Remus? For Bill?" She wasn't aware that she had approached Kingsley, was hitting him with her fists until Sirius dragged her away. "How could you!? Were your goddamned political aspirations so important, you deliberately put Remus and Bill at risk!?"

"Hermione ..." Sirius tightened his grip.

"How could you do this?" she cried. "He trusted you!"

"Remus knew the risk, Hermione," Kingsley said. "He knew and he went anyway."

"He would never have gone if you hadn't made him!"

"*Made him?*! He wanted to go! He wanted the chance to make things better for him, for others like him. He wanted to marry you, Hermione! He couldn't do that without changing the laws."

"*Wants to.*" Sirius' tone was as tight as the grip he had on Hermione. She'd stopped struggling, but he knew her. The second he loosened his hold, she'd take off.

"What?" Kingsley asked.

"Not he wanted to; wants to. Remus isn't dead, Kingsley. Do not talk about him like he is." He turned toward Bill, who was struggling to keep his eyes open. "Do you know where he is, Bill?"

He shook his head. "We fought. Greyback, he was alone, but he had the upper hand. He was coming for me and Remus ... he changed, dragged him away. I couldn't follow. Hermione, I'm sorry, but I couldn't follow him."

He lifted his arm. He had something in his hand. She wiggled out of Sirius' arms walked closer to see what it was.

Remus' wand.

She heard Harry suck in his breath, Mrs. Weasley let out a sob. Her own hand shook as she took the wand, staring at it, as if it could tell her where to find its owner.

"It's not your fault, Bill." Her voice was void of emotion as she pocketed Remus' wand. She avoided looking at everyone as she backed out of the room. She had to go. She had to go now. "I'm sorry, but I need ... I need to go." Turning, she ran, Sirius a few steps behind her.

"Hermione!" he yelled. "Hermione, wait!"

She stopped. The tears she could no longer hold at bay streamed down her cheeks. She was gasping for breath, her cheeks flushed, her eyes wild. "He's not dead, Sirius."

"I know."

"No, *I* know." She was desperate to make him understand. This wasn't wishful thinking, this was fact. He needed to believe her. He *had* to believe her. "He's part of me Sirius. If he was dead, I'd know."

Sirius stepped forward, slowly. "Do you know where he is? Can you ... I don't know ... feel him?"

She shook her head. "No. But I know he's alive."

He nodded. He believed her. He had to. He couldn't lose Remus. He couldn't lose another friend. He studied Hermione's face, looking to see if there was any chance she was lying, if she was telling him what he wanted to hear, needed to hear, but he could tell she believed every word she said.

She was telling the truth.

He took her hand. "You have to promise to tell me if that changes." She stiffened.

"I'm not saying it will," he stressed. "But if it does, I need you to be honest with me. Promise."

She nodded. "I promise."

She walked in the library for the first time in months. She went directly to the bookcase near the back, the one that held the Black family's collection of dark magic texts. Sirius talked about getting rid of them, but Remus intervened, telling him that the key to beating something was understanding it.

That's what she was going to do.

She grabbed an armful of books, not even sure what she was looking for, and carted them to the middle of the room. A cloaking spell transformed their appearance. She didn't want Sirius to know what she was doing. He'd worry. Harry couldn't know, either. He was gone, part of the search team retracing Remus' last known steps, but he'd be back. Maybe he'd come back with Remus. She hoped he would, but she wasn't going to wait. She was going to prepare for what she needed to do if everything else failed.

Constant vigilance.

"Hermione?"

Sirius looked like hell. He needed to sleep. He was going to make himself sick.

"Love, you've been here forever. You need to sleep. You're going to get sick."

Her laugh was hollow. "I thought the same thing about you."

He picked up one of the books. It was filled with revenge spells, but all he saw was one of Remus' defense against the dark arts texts. His eyes narrowed as he considered the tome. "What are you about, Hermione?"

She placed a book over her pile of parchment. "Nothing."

He shook his head. "I know you. You're incapable of doing nothing."

She didn't answer, but she did look at him. Her gaze was steady as they locked eyes. Sirius shuddered at the flatness he saw reflected in hers. "Hermione," he pled, "please don't ... Let the aurors do their job. Please. Promise me you won't do anything, OK? That you'll stay with me?"

She nodded automatically.

Time passed. Hermione spent most of her days in the library. She rarely left, not even to eat. The few times she'd leave, she'd be gone for hours, but because she always left a note and never returned looking worse for the wear, no one said anything. Sirius tried to relax. He told himself she wasn't planning anything, but he knew better. He knew how he reacted under stress and grief.

It scared him.

She was frustrated. She read every book in the Black's dark magic collection. She didn't have enough information; not yet. She visited stores in Knockturn Alley, but found nothing new. She considered going to the Ministry, but rejected the thought as quickly as it came. She wouldn't ask anyone there for help.

"You're too stubborn," Remus told her.

She looked up from the cookbook. She was trying to figure out why her homemade bread tasted nothing like Molly Weasley's; why Padfoot was using her latest attempt like a chew toy.

"I'm not stubborn."

"Sweetheart, you've been baking all day. Our kitchen belongs in a fairy tale – the first loaf was too hard, the second loaf was too soft."

She sighed. "Do you have a point, Remus?"

"It's not a bad thing to ask for help."

She'd wanted to throw a bag of flour at his head. She didn't need his advice when it came to baking; the man could barely boil water for tea. She could do this. She just needed to read the instructions again. Obviously, she was missing something ... She sat at the table, the frustration of the situation, the stupid, silly situation, made her floss to Molly. She returned hours later with two loaves of brown bread she'd baked herself.

Remus never said a word; just asked for seconds.

Hermione stared at her books, her notes. What was she missing?

"It's not a bad thing to ask for help."

The letter was easier to write than she expected. She didn't know if it would work, if he'd even reply, but she had to try. She'd try anything for Remus.

He stared at the letter. Of all the people in the world who'd sooner die than ask for his help, she topped the list. He ignored her request for one day, then another. He knew the search wasn't going well. He may not work in the Ministry, he may not have the contacts he once did, but *The Daily Prophet* was having a field day with the story.

The werewolf. The muggle-born witch. Soul mates fighting for the greater good.

It made him sick. No, not sick. Annoyed. After all these years, after everything she's seen, everything she's done, she still subscribed to Albus Dumbledore's way of thinking: love conquered all. She was supposed to be smarter than that.

He read the letter again. It was so her. She wanted something from him, needed something from him, but she wouldn't beg. She barely even asked. She was straightforward, precise, in her request without giving anything away. If he wanted to know more, he'd have to meet her.

He picked up a quill. He'd play. They'd meet her for lunch. He promised nothing more, nothing less. He, too, could hold his cards close to his chest.

She walked into the restaurant, a tiny café on the corner of London's west side. She knew the chances of her running into anyone she knew, anyone he knew, were minimal. That's why he chose it.

She smoothed her hands over her gray dress. It used to flatter her curves. Now it hung limply from her frame, physical proof of Remus' absence. She straightened her spine. She didn't care what she looked like. She wasn't him. She gave the hostess her name. A minute later, she was led to a table in the café's furthest corner. He was already there; his gray eyes assessing as he stood up.

"Granger."

"Hello, Draco."

Chapter 28

"I'm surprised you agreed to meet me," Hermione said.

"If you think so little of me, perhaps I should go," Draco replied dryly.

Hermione reminded herself to be polite. She needed his help. "I apologize. That was rude of me."

Draco pulled out her chair and gestured impatiently for her to sit. She was so surprised that she did. "To be honest, I considered ignoring your letter." He picked up the menu, eyeing her over the top. "I did for a few days."

She expected nothing else. "We don't need to do this."

He perused the specials. "Do what?"

"The 'friends meeting for lunch' thing," she told him.

"We're not friends."

"Exactly. Let's skip the formalities and get to the reason we're here."

"It's lunchtime. I'm hungry," Draco replied, still not looking at her. "Open the menu and order something. You're too thin. It makes your hair look even more ridiculous. I didn't know that was possible."

Hermione's mouth fell open in surprise. No one spoke to her like that. Everyone – Sirius, Harry, Ron, Mrs. Weasley – has coddled her since Remus disappeared. They've coddled her ever since he left. No one snapped at her. No one told her what to do; it was all pampering and indulging. It was sweet, supportive and oh so frustrating.

Hermione picked up the menu. She was going order the most expensive lunch available.

"By the way, you're paying Granger."

He watched her eat, her years of hanging around Weasley evident as she scarfed the second serving of bread the waiter brought to their table, consumed her salad, and devoured her lobster roll. He finished his portobello burger and slapped her hand away when she tried – again – to snag a potato crisp from his plate. "Living with animals has changed you," he observed.

"And?" She raised a brow at him.

"And what?"

"I'm waiting for the insult, Draco."

He smiled slowly. "I'm still trying to decide whether or not it's an improvement."

She rolled her eyes as she dabbed her mouth with her napkin, feeling ... well, feeling something. It was an improvement.

"May I interest either of you in dessert?" the waiter asked as he cleared their dishes.

Draco looked at Hermione with raised eyebrows. She shook her head.

"Just the check, please," she replied.

Waiting until the waiter was out of earshot, Hermione leaned forward, her face serious. "Now that we've dispensed with the meal, may I please tell you why I need to see you?"

"By all means," he drawled.

"I gather you already know."

"I have a pretty good idea, but enlighten me. I've been starved for entertainment as of late."

"Fenrir Greyback."

He didn't respond.

"He's alive."

He didn't look surprised.

"I'm convinced he has Remus."

He faked a yawn. "What does this have to do with me?"

"You know him."

"Hardly."

"He stayed at your house -"

"He was *not* a guest in my parents' home," he hissed, his eyes flashing in anger.

"But he was *there*. When I was being tortured, he was there. He watched. *You watched*."

He laughed sardonically. "Is that your plan, Granger; to make me feel guilty to the point that the only way I can live with myself is to help you?"

She sat back in her seat. She was tired. For weeks she'd been operating on momentum, her determination at finding Remus pushed her beyond exhaustion. She barely ate. She hardly slept. Her sole focus was him. She knew he was alive. She was determined to find him. She'd do *anything* to find him, but now ...

Draco was her last hope. If he refused to help, it was over. She didn't know what she expected from Draco Malfoy. This was the boy who called her "Mudblood" for nearly seven years; who took every opportunity he had to ridicule her and her friends. He didn't have a compassionate bone in his body. Sure, he managed to escape punishment following the war, but that didn't make him a good person.

"I don't know what I expected, Draco. Obviously, whatever it was, it was too much." Standing, she took some Muggle money out of her purse and set it on the table. "Owl me if it's not enough; I'll reimburse you."

She walked out of the café and, on a whim, turned left. She needed to find a place where she could cry. One long, loud, hard cry and then she'd go home, ready for another round of reassuring smiles for everyone who worried about her.

Someone grabbed her arm. She whirled around, wand in hand.

"Put that away!" Draco tightened his grip and pulled her into the shadows of a nearby alley. "Do you want to be seen?"

She did as she was told, but didn't let down her guard. "What do you want, Draco?"

"I thought you needed my help."

"And I thought you made it quite obvious you weren't interested in being helpful."

"Give a man a minute to catch up," he growled. "We're not all like you, thinking a million thoughts a second."

She crossed her arms and waited.

"Yeah, I know Greyback is alive. I don't know where he is. He was never too popular among wizards, even when he was fighting on Voldemort's side."

"Why was he let in?"

"Because he was ruthless. He wanted to infect as many people as possible so his kind could overpopulate ours. His goal fit well with Voldemort's at the time, but it was short-term thinking. Had things turned out differently, I'm sure Greyback would have been killed eventually."

"And you're giving me this history lesson because ..."

"Because you need to know what you're up against, Granger! He attacked your lover when he was a child! He loves going after women and children. Did you know that? He gets off on those who are weaker than him. If you and Potter and Weasley hadn't escaped that day, you would have been given to him. The Cruciatus Curse is child's play compared to what he would have done to you, what he'll do to you if you go after him."

"He has Remus, Draco," she said quietly. "I don't have a choice."

He stepped closer until they were nose-to-nose. "Are you prepared to be ruthless? Are you prepared to use magic you've never considered? Are you prepared to go so far, you might not find your way back?"

"I am."

"Are you sure?" He took her arm; the one Bellatrix had cut into with her wand. He removed the glamour. "You got off easy with this, Granger. Greyback will kill you. He'll torture you, he'll rape you, and then he'll kill you. Believe me when I say you will be grateful for death."

She nodded. "I know."

Sighing, he dropped her arm. "If he does have Lupin, he'll kill him, too."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

Draco shook his head. Bloody stubborn Gryffindor. He held out his arm. She took it without hesitation. A second later, they were gone.

She sat in the cream-colored armchair and waited for Draco to return. He may not have the power or the reputation he grew up with, but his London townhouse showed he still had the money to live the life he chose. She imagined he enjoyed the perks the Muggle world offered that the wizarding world did not. Disdain was easy to overcome when your ego controlled you.

"This is it." Draco walked into the parlor holding several battered books. "Most of my family's, shall we say *questionable*, items were seized after the war, but my father hid these well. I expect not to be tied to them."

"I'm not here as a Ministry employee." Hermione wasn't even sure she still was a Ministry employee.

"Very well." He gave her three books and kept two for himself. Settling in the armchair opposite Hermione, he conjured a crystal decanter of whiskey and two glasses, and opened a book.

"What are you doing?"

"Reading. It's been known to happen."

"But why?"

He sighed. "I owe Potter, OK? I don't like having a debt over my head. Now shut up."

She opened the top book in her pile. She immediately felt a rush of cold air over her body. It was almost like the time a dementor was on the Hogwarts Express and Remus ... She blinked her eyes. No. She could not think about Remus. Not now. She studied the book. It was just a

coincidence; a breeze, perhaps, but a quick look at the balcony confirmed that the doors were closed. She eyed the book warily. She looked at Draco to see if he felt it, too, but he continued to read, undisturbed. Forcing herself to ignore the feeling of cold fingers wrapped around her heart, she pressed on.

They read for more than an hour, with only the occasional sound of Draco sipping his whiskey to break the silence. She declined his offer of a drink.

"My father kept a journal."

Hermione looked up. "I'm sorry?"

Draco held up a leather bound book. His expression gave away nothing. "My father. He kept a journal. It has information about the first war, the second, Potter. You're in there. And Greyback."

"Is there anything that can help me?"

He tossed the book in her lap. "Quite a bit, in fact."

She picked it up, but his hand covered hers before she opened it. "Don't read it here, OK? I don't want to be around when you read it."

She nodded.

His grip on her hand tightened. "And don't pity me! The last thing I want is you feeling sorry for me."

"Should I go?"

He let go of her hand and reach for his drink. Hermione gathered the books. "Thank you for this, Draco. Truly. I don't know -"

"You really want to thank me, Granger? Destroy those. Once you get what you need, destroy them." He looked at her, his eyes cold. "Do NOT keep them around for others to discover. Promise me."

"I promise." He didn't respond. "Um ... I'll show myself out."

He gave no indication that he heard her, his eyes on the amber liquid in the glass. She put the books in her bag and walked to the door.

"Granger."

She turned. "Yes?"

He stared at his glass, not her, when he spoke. "You know this is a suicide mission, right?"

"How long have you known me, Draco?"

He scoffed. "Too long."

"Then you know most of my life has been a suicide mission." He didn't respond. She didn't expect him too. "Thanks again. Really."

He watched as she walked out the door. Holding his glass in a mock salute, he finished the liquid in one swallow.

She was shaking when she stepped into the kitchen. Her teeth were chattering, her fingers ice-cold.

"What the hell?" Sirius pulled her into him. He wrapped his arms around her and rubbed his hands up and down her back. She was freezing. "Hermione, what happened?"

She couldn't answer. She burrowed closer to him, greedy for the warmth of his body. Sirius tossed a handful of floo powder into the fireplace. "Molly!" he bellowed.

Seconds later, Mrs. Weasley appeared, one hand on her heart. "Sirius, for the love of – oh, my girl, what happened?!" She rushed through the fireplace and into the kitchen.

"Cold," Hermione mumbled, her voice muffled against Sirius' chest. "So cold."

Molly hurried to the liquor cabinet and removed bottle of firewhiskey. She poured a generous glass and handed it to Sirius. "Make her drink it. I'll start the shower."

Sirius reluctantly backed away from Hermione, flinching as she whimpered, and held the glass to her lips. "Drink, love. Come on." She took a swallow, coughing violently as the liquid burned down her throat. She pushed the glass away, but he was stronger. "No! You need this. Drink!"

The harshness of his tone got through to her. She finished the glass, the alcohol taking away some of the numbness that plagued her soul. Sirius kept an arm around her as he waved the teapot to the stove. She was still trembling. He sat at the table, pulling her in his lap. "Where were you? What happened?"

"I told you; I met a friend for lunch."

"Were you in Iceland?"

Sarcasm. She missed it.

Molly scurried back in the room. "Good, you've got the kettle started. Hermione, come with me. Sirius, bring the tea when it's ready." Not waiting for a reply, she took Hermione's hand and pulled her up to the third floor, into her bathroom already filled with steam from the shower. "OK, dear, take off your clothes and hop in."

Hermione did as she was told, Molly's brisk nature leaving no room for debate. It wasn't until she stepped inside the shower stall that it hit her – she was in her bedroom, the bedroom she shared with Remus. She hadn't been in there for months. The last time she was in this shower, he was with her. She stumbled with the realization. Seconds later, she was sitting on the floor, her body curled into a ball, sobbing as water cascaded over her.

Molly's heart broke as Hermione cried. She wanted to go to her, cradle her close, but she didn't. No one had seen Hermione cry since she learned Remus was missing. She had months of anger, fear and hurt to get through. As horrible as it sounded, as bad as it made Molly feel to know her child was hurting, she needed to feel the pain. She couldn't heal until she allowed herself to feel.

Molly gently closed the bathroom door. She cast a silencing spell to give the young witch her privacy.

Sirius walked in the room with Hermione's tea. "Is she OK?"

"She will be. She needs this." Molly gave the wizard a patient smile. She'll admit she wasn't always a fan of Sirius Black. Impulsive, reckless; he was not the best role. She wasn't thrilled when Harry and Hermione decided to live at Grimmauld Place instead of the Burrow, but seeing Sirius care for Hermione in Remus' absence softened most of her hard opinions.

"Did she say what happened?"

Molly shook her head. If she had to venture a guess, she imagined it had something to do with Remus and no amount of prodding would get it out of her. Stubborn did not begin to describe Hermione Granger.

Molly looked around the bedroom, hands on her hips. "How can Hermione sleep with all this dust?"

"She doesn't sleep here." Sirius missed the sharp look Molly gave him. "She set up a bedroom of sorts in the study."

Molly sighed. Her poor girl. "Well, she's going to need to nap, so let's get this place cleaned up and ready for her."

"Molly ..."

"No, Sirius. She can't hide forever. If we need to force her to face what's happening to get some sort of reaction out of her, we will. It's time."

She cried until she was empty. She forced herself to stand, to stumble to the small bench in the corner of the shower. She took a deep breath, then another, until she felt in control again.

She heard the door open slightly.

"Hermione?"

"I'm OK."

"All right. Are you ready to come out?"

She wasn't. She wanted to stay there forever. She wanted to remember the last time she was here, with Remus, her legs wrapped around his waist as he pressed her against the tiled wall. They hadn't spoken. Instead, they locked eyes and let their bodies say the words they were too scared to voice.

"I'm going to take a bath."

If Molly thought that was odd, she didn't say. She pushed the door open, set a pair of flannel pajama bottoms and a T-shirt on the counter, along with her tea. She added Hermione's wand to the pile, too.

"Sirius and I will be downstairs. Let us know if you need anything else."

"Thank you."

She waited until the door closed to turn off the shower. She felt better. She had feeling in her fingers again. She didn't know what charms were used to protect the books Draco gave her, but they were powerful, which meant the information had to be formidable. She needed to be smart about this. It wouldn't help anyone if she got hurt before she even started.

She sank into the deep tub with a sigh and forced herself to focus on pleasant thoughts, happy memories. If Remus were there, he'd give her chocolate. Rather than make her smile, the thought made tears well, but she refused to let them fall. "Happy thoughts."

"Ohmigod!"

"What?" he called from his bed.

"Your bathroom!" She turned in a circle, taking in the room that was nearly the size of her bedroom. The shower could fit three people easily, but it was the hot tub on the other end that had her mouth hanging open. "How have I not known this existed?"

A pair of arms circled her waist. "You think you and Harry are the only ones Sirius spoils?"

"Not like this!"

He chuckled and kissed the top of her head before walking to the tub to start the water.

"If I had known he was willing to do this, I would have asked for more than bookshelves in my bedroom," Hermione told him.

"He redid your bathroom, too." Remus sank into the warm water. He crooked a finger in her direction, sighing as she settled in front of him, her back against his chest.

"Not like this," she repeated, closing her eyes on a contented sigh. "I'm using yours from now on."

"What's mine is yours, sweetheart."

She jumped up, ignoring the water that splashed on the floor.

What's mine is yours.

She hurriedly pulled on the clothes Molly left for her and ran into her bedroom, grabbing Remus' wand from his nightstand. They had assumed he lost it in the fight with Greyback, but what if he left it behind? What if he wanted Bill to give to Hermione? What if, somehow, he transferred his magic into his wand? Was that even possible?

What's mine is yours.

Her mind was racing, thoughts crowding her brain. This could be it! She rushed downstairs, eager to share her theory with Sirius, coming to a dead stop when at the expressions on the witch and wizard's faces. "What happened?" Her mind immediately thought the worst.

Sirius gave her *The Daily Prophet*. On the front page was a story about the proposed changes to the anti-werewolf laws.

"Wizengamot votes Thursday," Sirius said. "Kingsley owed; he wants us to be there."

Hermione sat down to read the article. She skipped over Rita Skeeter's column – how she hated that woman – but seeing Remus' name made her go back.

The vote comes nearly two months after Remus Lupin's disappearance. The werewolf was on a reconnaissance mission for the Ministry of Magic when he disappeared somewhere near Leyburn. His whereabouts remain unknown. Efforts to locate Lupin have not been successful, with sources telling me that the search will soon come to an end.

"What does that mean?" Hermione looked up from the paper. "Are they calling off the search? Do they think he's dead?"

"It's Skeeter," Sirius scoffed. "Crazy bat makes up most of what she writes; you know that."

"But what if they do? What if no one believes he's alive?"

Sirius looked at her. "Is he alive?"

Hermione didn't hesitate. "Yes."

"Then they'll keep looking."

The sound of metal clanging against metal tore him from his dream, the image of Hermione fading as he struggled to open the eye that wasn't swollen shut. He shuddered, unbelievably cold in the small, damp, cell with only rags for clothes. He had no idea what time it was, what day it was. He didn't know how long he'd been here. He'd tried tracking the time scratching the cement wall, but with no window, no light, it was all a guess. The full moon, when he transformed, was the only time he had an inkling of the outside world, the only time he was let out of his prison.

He heard footsteps. Greyback. He struggled to pull himself to a seated position, gritting his teeth against the pain. He ignored the wounds that reopened under his efforts, the broken fingers of one hand. He wouldn't appear beaten. He refused to give the monster the satisfaction.

His stomach growled. He wasn't starving. Greyback was smarter than Lupin gave him credit for. To starve him would kill him and end the game. He didn't want his death; not yet. He gave Remus just enough to keep him alive. Alive, but never satisfied. Sometimes he'd increase the portions before the full moon, just to keep things interesting when he let Remus out "to play."

"You still alive, Lupin?" The monster appeared at the cage door. The scent of blood, of fear, clung to him. "Can't say the same for the mother and two kids I met last night." He chuckled. "She begged me for mercy, to take her and leave them alone. So brave. She reminded me of your Hermione." He leaned closer, his words softer. "She's coming, like a good little mate. Can you feel it? Tell you what, Lupin; when she gets here, I'll let you have one last look. Before I kill her."

Remus threw himself at the bars. "Bastard! You won't touch her!"

Greyback laughed. "Or what, cub? You'll preach to me about the traits of werewolves, about all the good they've done or can do? That they deserve to be treated as the human they are 353 days out of the year?" He reached inside his tattered black overcoat and pulled out a copy of *The Daily Prophet*. "Wizengamot voted yesterday. You got your wish. Werewolves now have the same rights as man. Hermione was there, along with your friend Black. She didn't comment on the vote, but she had plenty to say about this piece of news." He looked up and sneered. "It seems they want to award you the Order of Merlin, First Class, but she refused. She took offense at the word posthumously."

He dropped the paper on the floor outside of Remus' cell, photo side down so he couldn't see Hermione. "To be fair, she's right," Greyback remarked as he walked away. "You're not dead. Yet."

Remus fell to the floor, his body shaking with the effort to stay upright for that long. Hermione. His sweet, precious, amazing Hermione. He closed his good eye and waited for blessed sleep to take him to her.

Chapter 29

Harry swallowed the lump in his throat. He didn't want to be there. He didn't want to have this conversation. He knew how Hermione and Sirius would react, and that didn't make it any easier. If anything, it made things worse. He was going to break their hearts and they were going to try to make it better for him. What about them? Who was going to make things better for them?

He cleared his throat. Hermione pushed aside the pile of interview requests she'd received from Rita Skeeter ever since the anti-werewolf laws were abolished and she refuted Remus' Order of Merlin designation. The public couldn't get enough of the muggle-born witch who refused to believe her werewolf mate was dead. Skeeter's copy was pulling in the readers, even without Hermione's cooperation. Getting Hermione on the record was the ultimate prize.

Sirius kept his head down, his shoulders slumped in defeat. He held it together at the Ministry, at the Wizengamot vote, but once he got home, he locked himself in his room with two bottles of firewhiskey and the small black box Remus gave him Christmas morning.

"I knew it," Sirius smirked. "You love me. You really love me."

Remus rolled his eyes, keeping an ear out for Hermione. They were due at the Weasleys in a few minutes. "Sorry, Pads; my heart belongs to another."

Sirius took the platinum band with the small diamond out of the box and held it up to the light. Simple. Classic. Hermione. "So why am I the one admiring this ring?"

"Because I'm not giving it to her today. I want to wait until the law is repealed. Once it is, I plan to propose right there, in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement chambers."

"Nice," Sirius grinned. "A great way to make a statement, plus she'll be on a victory high and will agree to anything."

Remus laughed. "I'm pretty sure she'll say yes, but it doesn't hurt to stack the deck in my favor."

Sirius tucked the box in his pocket. "I'll guard it with my life, Moony."

"Try for better than you did for James."

"Hey! I was trying to give that woman a tip! She was a great dancer and deserved it! How was I supposed to know his ring was mixed in with my money? That's why Muggle money is stupid!"

"So you said 20 years ago."

"I got it back, didn't I?"

Remus laughed, remembering how a red-faced Sirius and a furious James had approached the exotic dancer after hours to explain the situation. Luckily, the woman had a romantic heart and handed the ring to James with her best wishes. They made a pact that night to NEVER tell Lily where her ring was before James placed it on her finger.

"Maybe I should hold on to it," Remus said.

"I've got this, Moony! You can trust me."

He took the ring to the Ministry of Magic for the vote. He wanted part of Remus to be present and, truth be told, he had hoped his friend would magically show up. It happened in books and movies all the time; why couldn't it happen for him?

"Um, we had a meeting today. At the auror office." Harry's hands were gripped together. "They feel we've exhausted out leads. It's been three months and with no new information ... they don't feel they can continue to dedicate so many aurors to the search."

"How many are they pulling?" Sirius asked.

Harry swallowed. "All of them. I'm sorry. As of this morning, the search for Remus has been called off."

Sirius jumped up, his chair crashing to the floor. He stood there, six-feet of anger, of fear. His eyes were dark, his face emotionless. He opened his mouth and Harry prepared himself for his anger, but he walked out of the kitchen without saying anything. A few seconds later, they heard the front door slam.

Harry took one of Hermione's hands with his own. "I'm so sorry. I tried to get them to change their minds, to let Ron and I keep looking, but ..."

She shook her head. She understood; she did. She didn't like it, but she understood. Three months was a long time.

"Can I do anything? Please, Hermione? Tell me there's something I can do."

She looked him in the eyes, her own deadly serious. "I want his file."

"What?"

"The search file. I want to see it."

Harry shook his head. "Hermione, I don't know how that's going to help."

She stood up. "That's what I want, Harry. Make it happen."

Fred coughed, his eyes watering as he waved a hand in front of his face. "Hermione?"

"Yes?" he heard her respond from somewhere in the room, but it was too foggy to see.

"I think ..." he coughed again. "I think you bumped up the formula too much."

A second later, the fog cleared and he could see his friend, standing over a cauldron, a sheepish look on her face. "You're right."

"I don't know why George wants to make Can't See Me stronger; we haven't had any complaints," Fred commented.

"You know your brother, always wanting to take things to the next level."

He shrugged. "I guess. But we can't sell this."

"Oh, I agree; it's too volatile. I'll find a safe way to dispose of it."

"Are you sure?"

"I made it. I'll get rid of it."

Nodding, Fred dropped a kiss on the top of her head and walked to the door. "Um, Ron told us about the search being called off. If you need anything ... if there's anything I can do, George can do ..." he broke off helplessly. There was nothing he could do; his brother could do, in this situation. Why make the empty offer?

"I know," Hermione replied. "If you don't mind, I just want to work, OK? Stay busy."

He nodded and left the lab. Once the door was closed, Hermione counted to 60, locked the door and bottled every ounce of her extra-strength Can't See Me potion. She tucked the bottles in an insulated box and slid it into her bag. She had just unlocked the door when George walked in.

"Hey, how's it going, pet?"

She gave him an absent smile and pretended to look over her notes. "I don't think Fred's plans for a stronger Can't See Me are feasible, George."

He nodded. He thought his brother's idea was daft when Hermione mentioned it to him, but she promised to explore the possibility to appease him anyway. She had a good heart like that. "I'll let him know."

"Oh, let me," she begged. "I think I'll be kinder."

He rolled his eyes. Like he cared about hurting Fred's feelings; it was a stupid idea, but this was Hermione. He wasn't going to say 'No' to her for anything. Not now. "Whatever you want, pet."

Hermione sat on her bed. It was early August, but she was wearing sweatpants, a long-sleeved shirt and two pairs of socks. She'd cast several warming spells and her patronus was floating around her bed as she flipped through the books Draco gave her one last time. Her precautions helped, but not much. She still felt cold and dirty every time she read them. She knew spells she never wanted to learn, attack methods she hoped she'd never use. Confident she had pulled everything she could from the ancient tomes, she packed them in a box and set it in her fireplace.

"Incendio."

The books screamed as they went up in flames. She looked at Lucius Malfoy's journal distaste. He was explicit in recording Voldemort's actions during both wars, his plans for blood traitors, half-blood wizards and witches and, of course, muggle-borns. She wondered if Fenrir Greyback ever knew how little he'd meant to Lord Voldemort. The dark wizard's disdain for werewolves was something he shared with only a few insiders. She'd use that to her advantage.

"Hermione!" Sirius knocked on the door. "Love, are you ready? We're supposed to be at the Weasleys in 15 minutes. It's time to go."

He was right. It was time to go.

"More potatoes, dear?"

"Will someone pass the rolls?"

"Heads up!"

Hermione ducked as a dinner roll flew over her head.

"Fred! We do not throw food!"

"Especially when you throw like that! *Percy* throws better than that!"

"Hey!"

It was loud. It was chaotic. It was messy. It was dinner at the Weasleys and it was what Hermione needed, what she wanted. Officially, the dinner was for Ginny. She graduated from Hogwarts in early June, but everyone was so concerned about Remus and Bill that it seemed wrong to celebrate her achievement. Truth be told, it still felt wrong, but Ginny would be leaving for training camp soon. She wanted her family together for one last meal before she left.

Hermione wanted that, too.

"Hermione, how are you?"

Hermione looked at Rebecca, who was trying to pretend having dinner with nearly two dozen witches and wizards was something she did often, but every time Molly would levitate a dish down the table, she jumped.

"I'm OK."

"Really? Because I'm here if you need to talk. Or cry. Or break things."

"Break things?"

"Oh yes, breaking things is great for stress. Well, until you calm down and realize you broke things that you like. Then you get upset again." She shrugged helplessly. "It's a vicious cycle, really."

Hermione smiled. Harry would be fine; he had Ginny. Ron would be fine because he had Rebecca. She glanced at Sirius, who was sitting on her right side. She wished she could guarantee his happiness. Not having Remus around was killing him. He'd already lost one best friend and surrogate sister when James and Lily were murdered. If her plan didn't work, he would have to suffer through that again. She didn't want to hurt him, but she didn't have a choice.

She took his hand and squeezed tightly.

"Are you alright?" Sirius whispered.

She nodded and continued her meal, keeping his hand in hers the entire time. If anyone noticed, they didn't say anything.

It was late when they returned home, Hermione's good byes taking the better part of an hour. She was careful to hug everyone at least twice.

"Did you have a good time?" Sirius asked, as Hermione filled the teakettle.

"I ate too much."

"It was probably time for that to happen." He opened a cupboard. Hermione slammed it closed.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked.

"Helping."

"No!"

"What?"

"I mean, no, thank you," she amended. "Go. Go sit in the study. I'll be there in a minute."

He gave her an odd look. "Are you sure you're OK?"

She let her guard down, for just a minute. "It's hard, Sirius. I need ... I need a minute alone. Please?"

He left. It was obvious he didn't want to, but he did. Hermione refused to feel guilty as she watched him leave. She didn't want to be deceptive. She knew he would be angry when he woke up, but she had to do this. Alone. After reading Lucius' journal, she knew a solo mission was the only option.

He thirsts for the mudblood; I don't know why. I've asked and he growls in response. Bellatrix laughs. She thinks it's cute. That's the word she used: cute. Or maybe she loves picturing Hermione Granger in several pieces. Either way, the Dark Lord has promised her to Greyback the minute he has Potter.

I almost feel sorry for her.

She finished the tea, adding two sugar cubes and one vial of sleeping draught to Sirius' cup. She carried both mugs to the study, handing Sirius his before settling on the other end of the couch with her own. Blowing on the hot liquid, she took a tentative sip, letting out the breath she didn't realize she was holding when Sirius did the same.

"Did you put something in this?"

She froze. The potion had the slightest of aftertaste. Not many people would notice. Why would Sirius be one of the few who could?

"No."

"Come on. You added a bit of firewhisley, didn't you?"

She forced a laugh. "Caught me."

He took another sip before he set the cup down on the coffee table. "Hermione ... we haven't really talked since they called off the search -"

"I don't want to talk."

"Love, you need to -"

"No. He's not dead, Sirius. I know that."

"So what, then? You are going to just live the rest of your life like a ghost!? Because that's what you've been for the past six months, Hermione!"

She wanted to run out of the room, but she couldn't. Not until he finished the tea, so she sat there and let him rave, clenching her fists until her fingernails gouged the palms of her hands. He couldn't know what she was going to do. He couldn't. Let him vent.

"I miss him, too, OK? Fuck, I miss him like crazy! What do you want me to do? Tell me and I'll do it, Hermione, but I can't keep living like this! I can't, OK?"

She picked up his cup and handed it to him. "Let's drink to Remus."

His mouth dropped open. It'd been weeks since she said his name. "Hermione."

"Please, Sirius; not tonight."

He sighed, but nodded. He lifted his cup to hers, the rims touching lightly. "To Remus."

They both swallowed, draining the warm liquid. Hermione took Sirius' cup and carried both to the kitchen. Making her way back to the study, she saw her friend nodding off on the couch. "Sirius? I think dinner is catching up with you."

"Huh?"

"You should go to bed."

"Oh. Right." He clumsily got to his feet and walked to the door. He gave her a hug. "I'm sorry I yelled. I love you. You know that, right?"

She wrapped an arm around his waist and helped him up the stairs. He fell face down on his bed, completely unconscious. He didn't even stir when she removed his boots. Hermione risked a few precious minutes sitting on the side of his bed, watching him sleep. "I'm sorry," she whispered, tracing the small moon on his collarbone with the tips of her fingers. "I love you, too."

She'd packed her bag that morning. She grabbed it from the wardrobe and placed her good bye note in the middle of the bed. She debated about leaving it for Sirius to find when he woke up, but this bought her more time.

She glanced around the room one last time. Nothing. There was nothing there without Remus. She took a deep breath and apparated, arriving outside a small house on a quiet street. It was quainter than Hermione expected. Lights were on in two windows, not that it mattered. Had it been dark, she would have woken the occupant up and not felt guilty about it at all.

She strode to the door and knocked twice. A second later, a petite blond with tight curls and jeweled glasses cracked the door slightly open to peek at the person on her doorstep. "Well, well, well. Hermione Granger."

"May I come in?"

Rita Skeeter smiled slyly and opened the door.

"Let me get this straight," the reporter repeated. "You're going to rescue Remus Lupin, but you don't know where he is?"

"I have a pretty good idea, but I need your help to get there."

"How?"

"Fenrir Greyback."

The woman didn't bat an eyelash. "What about him?"

"He's obsessed with Remus and me. He wants me to come to him. It needs to be me. I won't be able to find him if someone is with me. I can't explain it, but he's cast some sort of spell that blocks his whereabouts from everyone else."

"An interesting theory, Miss Granger, but I'm afraid I don't understand my role in this."

"I'm pretty sure he reads *The Daily Prophet*. Every time you write something about me, about Remus, I feel this burst of anger, rage. At first I thought it was just my usual reaction to your writing -"

"Careful, Miss Granger. You still my help."

"Please," Hermione sniffed. "We both know you're going to help me. The reward is too great."

"And what is that?"

"An exclusive. I find Remus, I bring him home and we have a sit-down interview with you, all access."

Rita's eyebrows raised in surprise. "All access?"

"We'll answer every question."

She had to stop herself from licking her lips in anticipation. Hermione Granger and Remus Lupin. Two of the brightest minds to come out of Hogwarts, both with great connections and, to be honest, the greatest love story she'd heard of. Her readers would gobble it up. She'd certainly get another book deal. "What if you aren't successful?"

Hermione reached into her bag and pulled out a parchment, sealed with wax. "This contains my obituary and Remus'. If you don't hear from me by the next full moon, we're dead and this is yours to use as you see fit. If you try to open it before then, it'll burst into flame."

"An obituary isn't as juicy as an exclusive."

Hermione smirked. "I agree. That's why you're going to help me."

"The next full moon is less than three weeks away."

"Then you won't have to wait long, will you?"

Rita carried the sealed parchment to her desk and slid it inside a drawer. She picked up a notebook and self-inking quill, and returned to her seat. "What do you want me to do?"

"What do you mean you don't know where she is?!"

Rita Skeeter's green eyes were shrewd as she considered the wizard who barged into her office. Miss Granger warned her that Sirius Black would demand answers, would want to know where she got her information. She had assured the girl she could handle herself. Dealing with angry readers was part of the job.

"I don't know who you're talking about," she replied calmly.

He slapped that morning's issue of *The Daily Prophet* on her desk. "The hell you don't! You wrote that sources say she's searching for Fenrir Greyback. She's the only one who could have told you that!"

She leaned back in her chair. "Perhaps you don't know her as well as you think you do, Mr. Black."

He took out his wand. "Give me a reason, Skeeter. I beg you."

She didn't bat an eye. Instead, she used her own wand to close her office door and gestured for Sirius to sit. Reluctantly, he did, though both still kept their wands trained on the other. "What I wrote is what I know, no more, no less," she said. "Miss Granger did come to see me and did tell me her plans, but that's all. I have no way of knowing where she is now."

"Is that what she told you to tell me?"

He was smarter than people gave him credit for. "It is, but it's also the truth. Mr. Black, you know as well as I do how smart this girl is. If anyone has a chance of accomplishing what she hopes to do, it's her."

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Writing battle scenes is hard! That being said, I humbly offer the following chapter.

She was getting closer. She could feel it. She'd been traveling for hours, apparating to various places around England to make following her difficult. She exhausted her supply of Can't See Me somewhere around Surrey. Satisfied she didn't leave a trail, her focus shifted to Greyback. Months of research made it easy to emulate the monster's way of thinking. He'd want to be close to a city, somewhere with a high populous so that his victims' disappearances weren't immediately known. He no longer had the support of the Death Eaters, so he'd choose somewhere familiar, somewhere he felt comfortable.

Her breath came out on short bursts. She was tired, but she couldn't stop. He was waiting. She knew that, expected it. She had to be strong. She had to be ready to fight. She stumbled over a tree root, but managed to keep from falling. Five minutes. She's rest for five minutes. She needed her strength.

She knelt on the ground. She could feel his anger, his anticipation.

Soon.

He walked into their office, a pile of books in his arms. She was sitting on top of his desk with her legs crossed, a smile on her face. "What?" She said nothing. Intrigued, he set his books on her desk. "You're up to something."

She slid off the desk and walked to the door, pushing it closed and locking it. She performed a silencing spell while her back was to him and turned around. "Thank you for seeing me like this."

His eyes drew together in confusion. "Seeing you? Hermione, what are you talking about?"

She approached him slowly, her steps nervous, as if she was worried what might happen once she got to him. "I'm so overwhelmed," she said somewhat breathlessly. "This term is so much harder than I anticipated."

"Term?"

"I've learned so much from you, Professor." Now standing directly in front of his, she reached out to straighten his tie. "You've always been my favorite teacher. I want to do well in your

class, but it's so difficult when all I want to do ..." She broke off and turned away.

He smirked, catching on to her game. He reached out and grabbed her upper arm, turning her so she faced him again. "How can I help you, Miss Granger?"

She pressed her lips chastely to his, then quickly jumped back, as if burned. She started to apologize. He cut her off by grabbing her again, bringing her body flush with his and devouring her lips. "Is this what you want, Miss Granger?" She moaned, rising to her tiptoes so she could press her lips against his more firmly. "Is this what you thought about when you fantasized about us, Hermione?" She didn't respond. Instead, she brought her hands to his robe to unbutton the heavy garment, sliding his off his lithe frame.

"Answer me," he demanded.

"Yes," she whispered between kisses. "I'd picture you in your office, trying to work, and I'd come see you. You'd try to send me away, but our passion would be too great. You'd sweep your desk clear, lift me on top and take me."

"Like this?" he grinned, doing just that. Books, parchment and quills went flying. He gripped her by the waist and placed her on his desk, nudging her legs apart so he was nestled between her thighs.

"How naked would I make you?" he asked, kissing his way down her neck.

"Mmm. We wouldn't have much time," she whispered. "You'd unbutton my shirt, but leave it on and push my skirt up."

He stepped back, a wicked look on his face. She loved when he looked at her like that. "You were thorough, sweetheart."

She grabbed him by the tie, bringing his face to hers. "Reality is better than the fantasy, Professor. Let me show you."

Remus opened his eyes, the memory of that afternoon so real, he could practically smell Hermione. He rolled to his hands and knees, taking a minute to gather his strength before sitting up. It was getting harder. He was cold. He was hungry. His muscles ached. His bones hurt. He didn't want to leave Hermione alone; their bond was the only thing keeping him tethered to earth, but he didn't know how long that could last.

Mates rarely spent time apart. He'd been without his for months.

"She's coming."

His head jerked up, brown eyes narrowing at the monster smirking at him just outside his cage. "You're lying," he growled.

"I'm not. You know I'm not." He leaned closer. His eyes glittered in anticipation and excitement. "I know you can smell her. I can, too."

Remus closed his eyes. That wasn't her scent. It couldn't be. She wouldn't do this; she wouldn't risk her life for his.

"You want to beg, don't you?" Greyback sneered. "I know you do."

He did. So much. But he wouldn't. He wouldn't give him the satisfaction. "You don't want her," he whispered. "We both know that."

Greyback's eyes narrowed.

"Killing her won't change anything. I belong to her; I always have. Kill her, you kill me."

Greyback turned to leave.

"So be it."

She stopped walking. This was it. She couldn't explain how she knew, she just did. She'd found his hiding spot. He'd come to her. He'd show himself and they'd fight. She might win. She might lose. She sat in the middle of the dense forest, closed her eyes and gathered her magic; her magic and Remus'. She'd need both if she was going to survive.

"Hermione Granger."

Her eyes popped open. He stood by a tree across the clearing, arms crossed over his chest, his lips twisted sardonically. He looked older than the last time she saw him, grayer in his hair and in the fur that covered part of his face. His clothing was dirty, tattered.

"Greyback." Her tone was calm despite the frantic beating of her heart. She knew he heard it. She allowed herself to dip into her magical reserves to elevate her fear. He expected it. Why not give him what he wanted?

She stood. He was on her immediately, his hand tight on her arm. "I wondered when you would get here," he snarled. "It took longer than I expected."

She felt removed from the experience. She was there, breathing his stench, but it didn't seem real. Focus, she needed to focus. "You didn't expect me to come unprepared."

"Of course not."

Hermione struggled to match his steps with her own as he stalked through the woods, the claws on his hand digging into her forearm. She wanted to fight. Oh, how she wanted to hurt

him, but she forced herself to wait. She needed to be where Remus was first.

A cabin appeared before them. Greyback opened the door and pushed her inside. She fell to the ground, bruising her knees on the wood floor. "I was under the impression that you didn't have magic of your own," she said.

His kick to her ribs stole her breath. Gasping, she pushed the pain away as she struggled to her feet.

Focus on Remus. Ignore the pain; think of Remus.

"I don't need magic, witch," Greyback growled.

"Obviously you do or you would've been discovered months ago."

Reaching under his ragged coat, Greyback drew out a gold chain. Dangling from it was a tiny vial, dark liquid inside.

"Remus' blood?" she guessed.

"And yours. Combine the two with a favor someone owed me and it was easy to remain hidden from those I didn't want to find me."

"Why?"

His eyes narrowed.

"Why do this? No one knew where you were. You could have lived the rest of your life -- "

He hit her again. His fist connected with the side of her face. She stumbled, but didn't fall.

"Are you honestly trying to talk to me, little girl?"

"I want to know *why*. Why do you hate Remus so much? Is it because your bite didn't destroy him? Are you jealous?" She stared at the werewolf. Clarity came to her in a flash. "That's it, isn't it? You sought him out for revenge, but it backfired. Your bite; you're convinced it made him yours, but it didn't. He went to school. He made friends. He found his mate."

He attacked with a roar. He knocked Hermione to the ground and gripped her chin in a bruising hold. "He isn't yours," he growled.

Lie.

She heard Moony's response in her head. It was faint, but it was there. Greyback was wrong. Remus was hers and she was his. Greyback didn't understand that. He's never understand the bond between two mates. Nothing was stronger. Hermione smiled. She gripped her wand and Remus' in her hand prepared to fight.

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

Greyback's body levitated above her own and she scrambled to her feet. Another spell sent him crashing into the wall so hard the entire cottage shook, but it didn't stop him. He rushed at her again, claws out. She raised the wands, but he knocked them from her hands.

"Now what, witch?" He backhanded her face. She fell to her knees and screamed as his claws gouged her back.

"Are you prepared to be ruthless? Are you prepared to use magic you've never considered?"

Darco's words echoed inside her head as she crawled away. He tackled her from behind, his breath hot on her neck. She twisted and kicked as she tried to buck him off, but he was too strong. His hands wrapped around her neck and squeezed. Spots appeared before her eyes.

"Are you prepared to go so far, you might not find your way back?"

"Accio wands" she gasped. She felt the comfort of them seconds later.

"Crucio!"

Greyback howled in agony. She scrambled to her feet and watched, fascinated, as the werewolf writhed in pain. She did that. *She* fucking did that! More! She wanted more! He deserved so much more. She wanted him to *hurt*.

She ended the spell. He gasped, barely able to turn his head to glare at her. His eyes were murderous. They promised pain.

Hers did, too.

"Crucio!"

He screamed. Months of anger, of agony -- she pushed all of it at Greyback. She didn't give him a chance to catch his breath, but repeated the spell over and over again. He needed to feel pain.

Hermione.

She stumbled, breaking focus, ending the curse. No! She couldn't stop! She wouldn't! He deserved this! He deserved more.

Hermione, it's over.

It isn't. They thought that before and he came back. He'd always would! He wanted to destroy them. He would not stop until he succeeded. She knew that. She had to stop him. Hermione raised the wands again. She would stop him. She knew how. The answer whispered in her ear seductively. Two words. Two words and it'd be over.

Hermione, no.

She shook her head against the voice in her head. Not no; yes. It was the only way.

Sweetheart. Sweetheart, please.

Her arms fell to her sides, defeated. Tears streamed down her face. She couldn't. She wanted to, oh how to wanted to, but she couldn't.

"I knew it." Blood trailed out of the corner of his Greyback's mouth. "I knew you couldn't do it."

"Stupify!"

Red light shot from both wands, hitting Greyback square in the chest. She performed the binding spell, her gaze cold as she took in the unconscious form before her. She could kill him. She could kill him now. It scared her how much she wanted to. Instead, she ripped the chain from Greyback's neck and threw it to the ground, crushing it with her feet.

"Expecto Patronum!"

Both otter and wolf appeared. Hermione sent them to Harry and Sirius, requesting aurors for Greyback and healers for her and Remus.

Remus!

She wrapped an arm around her waist to slow the flow of blood as she looked around the sparse room. Remus was there. She knew it. She could feel him. Where was he?

The first closed door led to a bedroom. She limped into the kitchen. Pain coursed through her as the adrenaline of the fight left her body. She gritted her teeth. She couldn't stop, not yet. Her eyes narrowed on a metal door in the corner.

"Alohomora!"

She hobbled down the narrow staircase, feeling the pain of Greyback's attack with every step. Drops of her blood stained the floor. She was tired. She felt drained. She was dizzy, so dizzy. And cold. Why was she so cold?

"Remus!" She shouted his name. Her voice barely made a sound.

"Hermione?" The response was faint, but it was him. Remus!

The tears started again, from happiness or hurt she didn't know. But the pain was less, duller. That was good, right? Maybe it was bad. She couldn't remember.

"Hermione?" Remus sounded worried. Why was he worried? She was there. She was in front of his cage. The stench .. oh Gods. Remus. Remus, don't worry! It's going to be OK. Everything is going to be OK. Why did he look scared? Couldn't he hear her?

She struggled to lift the wands, to say the word that would open the cage, to free her mate from his nightmare; their nightmare.

"Alohomora."

She slumped to the ground as the cage swung open.

Chapter 31

"You can't separate them!"

"Calm down, Mr. Black."

"Do **not** put them in separate rooms."

"Sir, you need to -"

"Listen to me! You want them to live? Don't separate them! *Please!*"

Sirius sounded so scared. She'd never heard him be scared before. Angry? A lot. Frustrated? Often. Worried? Sometimes. But never scared.

She couldn't hear Remus. Where was he? Was he OK? Was he alive? Remus!

"Hermione, love, Remus is going to be fine. Do you hear me? He's going to be fine."

He's going to be fine. He got out. She got him out.

"You're going to be OK. Do you hear me? You. Will. Be. OK."

She wished he would stop talking and leave her alone. Her head hurt. Her body hurt. Breathing hurt. She wanted to sleep. She liked the dark. The dark was peaceful and quiet. She wanted to go back there.

"Hermione? Hermione, can you hear me?"

"We're supposed to let her sleep."

"I *know* that, Ginny."

"Then stop asking her to wake up!"

"I'm not asking her to wake up; I'm asking if she can hear me!"

"How is that different, Ron?"

"You guys, come on. She needs to sleep. They both do."

The man was as white as the sheet that covered him. He'd lost so much weight; they could see his ribs through the blanket. There was barely an inch of his body not covered in bandages. No one said anything, but they all knew the healers were worried about what impact the full moon would have on him.

Hermione was pale, too, except her face. It was a maze of bruises, pale yellowish-brown bruises. Greyback's fingerprints were still visible on her neck. Bandages covered the gashes he made in her stomach and back.

"Will they wake up?"

"The healers think so. Their bodies ... Remus was close to death. Hermione lost a lot of blood."

"Rest will help."

"They're talking about us," she said.

He smiled and hugged her. She was sitting in his lap, her legs wrapped around his waist, arms around his neck, her head resting on his chest. He had his arms around her, but it wasn't enough. He wanted to be closer. He nuzzled her neck and kissed his mark, tracing the outline with his tongue.

"Are we dying, Remus?"

He pulled back slightly. She didn't look scared, mostly curious. "I don't know. I hope not."

She bit her lip. "I don't want to leave Sirius alone."

That was his Hermione; always thinking about others. "No, he wouldn't like that."

"We'd never hear the end of it!"

He chuckled and kissed her. "I missed you," he whispered against her lips. "I missed you so much."

"I missed you, too. Remus, please never leave me again. Promise me."

"I will if you promise never to risk your life like that again."

She pulled back. "And what would you suggest I'd have done instead, huh? Wait for you to come home? If you recall, I waited nearly seven months for you to do just that!"

He grinned at her.

"Don't smile at me, Remus Lupin! You knew exactly what you were doing when you left your wand behind."

"I hoped you'd figure it out."

She hit him in the shoulder.

"Ow!"

"That was a stupid thing to do, going after Greyback without magic."

"And how do you think you would have defeated him if I hadn't given you my wand?"

"Are you saying I couldn't do it on my own?"

"Sweetheart, you did do it on your own."

"No, I didn't," She ran a hand through his hair, a gentle smile on her face. "I had you."

He kissed her again. "That's how it's supposed to be."

"How are they?"

Sirius looked up at Harry's question from his perch on a chair between the two beds. He had one hand on Remus' arm, the other on Hermione's. "No change," he said dully.

Harry moved over to the chair on Hermione's other side, taking her free hand in both of his. "That doesn't mean bad news, Sirius."

"It's been days, Harry."

"He was gone for month months, locked in a cage with barely any food and water. He needs to rest."

"And her?"

Harry looked at his best friend. He loved her so much, even when he wanted to strangle her, which, if he was honest with himself, was most of the time. She was too smart for her own good. Too damn stubborn. "She's drained. She used all of her magic – and Remus'."

"I hate this," Sirius muttered.

"I do, too."

"How'd you find us?"

Hermione looked down. Remus was lying on his back, his head in her lap. His eyes were closed, but she knew he was listening. She continued to massage his temples, smiling when he'd moan in pleasure. She told him earlier it sounded like he was purring and he pounced, tickling her until she was breathless.

"I could feel his anger. Not all the time, but there'd be moments of pure hatred and I knew it was him. I focused on that when I apparated and it brought me to the forest."

"But how did you know he'd be angry?"

"I may have asked Rita Skeeter to plant something in her column. I figured he was keeping tabs on the search somehow and The Daily Prophet seemed like the best source of information."

Remus tried to picture his witch asking Rita for a favor and couldn't. "Oh, how you must have hated asking for her help."

Hermione flushed, remembering the promise she'd made. "Well ... she didn't do it out of the goodness of her heart."

"Of course not," he replied.

"I promised her an interview."

"Oh? Well, you'll be fine, I'm sure."

"An interview with both of us."

He opened his eyes. "What?"

"I promised her an all-access interview."

"You should have let me die."

She smacked him on top of his head.

"Ow! Do you realize you have hit me more in the past – well, however long we've been here – then the entire time you've known me? Are you sure all that dark magic is out of you?"

"Do NOT joke about dying!"

"Fine, fine. I'm sorry."

They were quiet for a moment. Remus nudged her hands with his head so she'd continue the massage. "What does 'all-access' mean, exactly?"

"If she asks about our sex life, we answer it."

"Shit."

"The full moon is two days away. Should we move them?" the healer asked.

"'Them?' Don't you mean him?"

"She was cut by a werewolf."

"Cut; not bitten."

"He was in human form. She's not affected."

"Bill, don't -"

"No! I know what I'm talking about; the same thing happened to me."

"Fine, but Mr. Lupin is a werewolf ..."

"And Hermione Granger is his mate. He won't hurt her."

"Mr. Black, I know you care about your friends, but -"

"I've seen it, OK? The wolf knows who she is. He won't hurt her. You've injected the Wolfsbane, right?" The healer nodded. "OK. Then it will be fine. Ward the doors, but they'll be fine."

"Mr. Black."

"Trust me."

"Are you OK?"

"Full moon," he gasped.

"Will you transform here?" She looked around, still not sure where here was. It was white. It was quiet. They didn't seem to need or want anything. She supposed she should look around, see if there was a way to leave, but she didn't want to. It didn't hurt here. Remus was here. Why wouldn't they stay?

"I don't think so." He spoke through gritted teeth.

She watched as his body tensed for several minutes. He breathed heavily. His eyes were squeezed shut. When he opened them, they were amber, but everything else was Remus.

"Now what?"

He sprawled on his back, tugging her arm until she was lying next to him, her head on his chest.

"We wait."

"What the – hello! Someone! We need a healer in here!"

Sirius jumped from his chair in the hallway, and ran to Remus' and Hermione's room, Molly Weasley on his heels. Expecting the worse, his body sagged with relief when he got to the doorway.

"What is it?" Molly was on her tiptoes as she tried to peer over Sirius' shoulder. He moved aside so she could see the image of man and woman, curled together, in one bed.

"I'm guessing Moony was tired of being separated from his mate." Sirius drew the blankets over both figures. "Good for him."

Molly shook her head, but she had tears in her eyes.

"Can you do it now?"

She closed her eyes, concentrated, and took a deep breath. Nothing happened "No. Did I lose it? When I did the curse, did I lose my magic?"

"No." He framed her face with her hands. "It's rebuilding. It's like blood. You lose some and, eventually, your body regenerates what you need."

"You can feel your magic returning?"

He nodded.

"What's it like?"

His face was thoughtful. "It's like ... it's like sinking into a warm tub after a cold day. It's soothing, comforting. Everything feels right."

She nodded, but he could see the worry in her eyes.

"It will come back, sweetheart. You didn't lose it."

"What if ... what if I'm being punished?"

"You stopped yourself before you went too far."

*"No. **You** stopped me. I heard you."*

He looked surprised. "You heard me?"

She nodded. "Your voice. You told me to stop, that I wasn't a killer."

He brushed a hand through her curls, tucking them behind her ears. "I was right, wasn't I?"

"... we're pleased with their progress. It's amazing, really."

"So why haven't they woken up?"

"Mr. Black, I understand your concerns, but believe me when I say rest is what they need. From what I understand, Miss Granger isn't the easiest person to control." Several people scoffed, making the healer smile. "If that's true, the longer she's unconscious, the better it is for her health."

"And Remus?"

"Mr. Lupin's body is rundown. He has a lot of work ahead of him to get his strength back, so it's best he rests now."

"I'm afraid," she whispered.

"What are you afraid of?"

"Of what happens next."

She was staring at the vastness of nothing above her, chewing on her bottom lip. He rolled to his stomach so he could kiss her. "You'll be fine, sweetheart; I promise."

"What if I have to go to Azkaban?"

"You're NOT going to Azkaban!"

"I did an Unforgivable Curse -"

"On someone who was going to kill you! It was self-defense, Hermione."

She nodded, but she still looked worried. "Did you know?" she asked.

"Know what?"

"That he thought you were his."

He shrugged, looking uncomfortable. "I always knew he hated me. I thought that's what it was: hate. I never considered it was jealousy until ..."

"Until?"

"Until he caught me. I thought you were the one he wanted, but he wanted you out of the way. He didn't understand. Losing you would have killed me. He'd rather I was dead than with you."

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged again. "It's over now. He's either dead or in Azkaban."

She sat up. "We have to go back, don't we?"

"We can't stay here forever, Hermione."

"It's going to be loud."

He nodded.

"We're going to hurt."

He nodded.

"We have to do that interview."

He flinched. "Maybe we can stay a bit longer."

She snuck down the hall. Her heels didn't make a sound, thanks to a clever little clothing spell.

"Are you sure we should be doing this?" The photographer whispered.

"They woke up today," she replied. "I was promised an exclusive and I'm going to get it."

They arrived at their door. The sign requested no visitors, but that didn't stop her from pushing open the door.

Two bodies lay in one bed, which had been enlarged to allow room for both. The man was on his back, one arm wrapped around the woman's waist, the other tangled in her hair. She lay next to him, one arm tucked between their bodies, head on his chest, her hand resting over his heart.

"Are you going to wake them?"

Rita stared at the couple. They looked like hell. Both bodies were bruised, bandaged, and yet the looks on their faces as they slept ... it was more than peaceful. They were happy.

"Rita?"

"Hmm? No. No, let them sleep. I know Hermione Granger. She won't renege on our deal."

The photographer nodded and turned to leave.

"Wait!" She grabbed the sleeve of his robe. "Take a picture first."

Chapter 32

"I'm going to kill her." Hermione's quill was practically steaming as she composed a letter to Rita Skeeter regarding the photograph on the front page – *front page!* – of that day's *Daily Prophet*.

"You knew what you were getting into when you asked for her help." Remus ducked his head to hide his grin when she turned her murderous hazel eyes in his direction. He wasn't thrilled with the picture, but he was grateful for the distraction. Since waking up, Hermione had been anxious. She put on a happy face for the healers and their numerous visitors, but when it was just the two of them, she sank into herself. Her magic had yet to return and as much as he tried to reassure her that the temporary loss was just that – temporary – he knew she had doubts.

"Why aren't you more upset about this?" Hermione asked now. "What happened to the man who considered *Harry* a threat to our relationship?"

He shrugged. It could be the effect of the three double chocolate chip muffins he'd polished off, courtesy of Molly Weasley - the matriarch took the healers' orders to gain weight seriously and saw no wrong in indulging his love for chocolate – or it could be that after months apart, he was so happy to have Hermione by his side, everything else was inconsequential.

The door opened and a woman walked in, frowning slightly at the crumbs that covered the bed.

"Mr. Lupin, I'm here to take you to your afternoon physical therapy session."

Sighing, Remus swung his legs out of bed. Physical therapy was torture. It felt as if his body had forgotten how to do the most basic of functions, like stand for more than five minutes or hold a book. Potions healed some of the damage more than three months of captivity caused, but magic couldn't fix everything.

"Do you want me to go with you?" Hermione asked. She asked every time, but he always shook his head no. Call it vanity; he did not want her to see him like that.

Alone for the moment, Hermione turned back to her letter. She wasn't going to cancel the interview. She made a promise and she kept her promises, but thanks to Rita's latest stunt, there were going to be some rules.

"You look murderous."

Her head jerked up as Sirius strode into the room. He plopped down on the chair next to the bed. Holding the paper up in response, she took in his nod of understanding before going back to her letter.

"You know, you don't have to talk to her."

"Yes, we do. I promised," she replied, silently reading what she wrote.

"You promise a lot of things, Hermione."

She looked up again. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, I don't know." Sirius leaned forward in his chair. "How about promising me you weren't going to leave and then drugging me so you could take off in the middle of the night? How about leaving *a fucking note* that said 'Hey, sorry, but I've got to do this?'"

"My note did not say -"

"That's not the point!" he said in a fiercely controlled voice. "I promised to take care of you!"

She swallowed her guilt. "Remus was missing! He was dying! I had to do something!"

"And I couldn't help?" He pushed out of the chair, not noticing when it crashed to the ground. "I've only known the guy since we were 11!"

"He's not your mate!" she shouted.

"He wouldn't be yours if I hadn't pushed the matter!"

Her look was incredulous. "You're going to claim responsibility for that?"

"You didn't have a clue and he was so wrapped up in moral judgment -"

"Stop yelling at her!"

The pair turned as Harry stormed inside the room, his face red with anger. "What the hell is wrong with you?" he shouted at his godfather.

"Come off it, Harry; you're just as mad as I am!"

He was. He was *furious*. He'd never forget how he felt that morning when they realized what she'd done. He'd never been so mad and so scared in his entire life, and he hoped he never would be again. "I'm not going to scream at her while she's in the hospital!"

"So you say nothing? She gets away with taking off with no regard to anyone -"

"This isn't the time!"

"Stop yelling!" Hermione shrieked.

"No!" Sirius shouted. "I've gone through hell these past few weeks and I want to yell!"

"Then go yell somewhere else!" Hermione shouted back just as loud.

"I want to yell at you!"

"Why?"

"Because I love you and you scared the shit out of me and if I don't yell, I'm going to fucking lose it, OK?!"

Hermione burst out crying. She threw herself at Sirius, sobbing. The older wizard pulled her into his arms, murmuring words Harry couldn't understand. After a few minutes, the pair grabbed him and pulled him into their emotional cocoon, Hermione practically strangling him with her fierce hug and Sirius gripping his shoulder so tight, he knew he'd have bruises, but he didn't care.

"Your hair looks different," Sirius remarked.

Hermione looked up from her book. Remus and Sirius were playing wizard's chess; the two of them perched on the bed while she was curled in one of the room's chairs. Harry was slouched in the other chair. Technically, visiting hours were over, but the staff at St. Mungo's was familiar with Sirius' casual disregard for rules. It was easier to let him do what he wanted since he was going to, anyway.

Hermione ran a hand through her curls in a self-conscious gesture and nodded.

"Why?"

Remus studied Hermione, wondering if she'd tell the truth. He'd heard the screaming match earlier – you'd have to be deaf or dead not to, and even then it was questionable – but when he got back to the room, all three were sitting around like nothing happened. The healers were concerned until Remus assured them it was normal.

"Um ... my hair kind of caught fire."

"WHAT?" Harry yelled.

Hermione turned the page in her book, feigning casualness. "Yes. When I did the curse, the power singed my hair and some of it burned off." She risked a glance at Harry. His eyes were wide, his mouth open in shock.

"Holy shit," Sirius said after a few minutes. "Your girl is a badass, Moony."

"You might want to remember that the next time you yell at her," he advised.

Two more days passed before the visit Hermione feared happened.

"Hermione," Kingsley said in greeting. He took the chair vacated by Sirius minutes before.

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She wished Remus was there, but he was at therapy. Did Kingsley wait for her to be alone? Were the aurors waiting in the hallway?

"You aren't going to Azkaban."

She looked at him, wide-eyed. "I'm not?"

"No. Your life was in danger. Your mate's life was in danger. You protected yourself and saved Remus. That's the end of the matter as far as the Ministry is concerned."

She closed her eyes and breathed a sigh of relief.

"I want to apologize for sending Remus on his mission." Kingsley sat tall in the chair. He wasn't speaking to her as a friend, as someone he fought with during the war, but as a politician. "I will maintain that it was important to eradicate the law, but I should have been upfront with you about Greyback's unknown whereabouts beforehand."

"He still would have gone."

"Probably; he's a stubborn man."

"A stubborn man who always wants to do the right thing," she muttered.

Kingsley's eyes twinkled. "Remind you of anyone?"

She didn't respond, but smiled slightly.

"I came to tell you something else. Greyback is dead."

She gasped. "Did I ... is it my fault?"

He shook his head. "No. He was transported to Azkaban and was found dead in his cell this morning. The report said he died of natural causes."

"But -"

"That's the official report, Hermione," he said in a cool voice. "Accept it. Accept it and move on."

She stared at him. She knew what he was saying, or wasn't saying, to be more accurate. He died from injuries sustained during his torture, but no one was going to investigate further. This was her out, her chance to let go of the guilt and begin healing; really begin healing. Swallowing her tears, she nodded. Satisfied, Kingsley got up to leave. Hermione watched him walk toward the door.

"Kingsley?"

He turned. "Yes?"

She took a deep breath. She wanted to get better. It was not only time to let go of her guilt, but also her anger. "My birthday's in a couple days. Remus and I won't be released yet, so we're having a small celebration here ... well, as small as expected with the entire Weasley

family present. I'd love for you to stop by ... if you want to. I doubt the healers will complain too much if you're present."

"You overestimate my power, Hermione," he replied with a smile. "Thank you. I'd be happy to attend."

Hermione snuggled closer to Remus. She'd almost forgotten how warm he was. His body heat, combined with his calloused fingers drawling lazy circles on her back, had nearly put her to sleep when he spoke up.

"Are you ever going to tell me about your tattoo?"

She buried her face in the crook of his neck. "It's your birthday present."

Whatever he expected her to say, it wasn't that. "Excuse me?"

"We got tattoos on your birthday, in honor of you."

"We?"

"Sirius, Harry, Ron and I," she sat up. "Ron got a Jack Russell Terrier because that's his Patronus and you are the reason Harry was able to teach him how to make one. And both Harry and Sirius got the full moon, but Sirius' is on his collarbone and Harry got his on his shoulder."

Remus smiled, incredibly touched. "What'd you get? I only got a glimpse when the healer removed your bandages." She turned and lifted her shirt so he could see the moonflower on her left shoulder. She shivered as he traced it with his fingertip. "My flower."

"Of course. I'm yours."

Leaning forward, he kissed it lightly. "That is one of the ... I don't know what to say." He set Hermione's shirt to rights, and then pulled her back into his arms. "Thank you."

She breathed in his scent. Oh, how she'd missed him. "You realize you have no excuse not to get one of your own, right?"

He chuckled softly. "I give Sirius two days before he drags me to some tattoo parlor after we finally get released."

"We're in a hospital; not prison."

Kissing her neck, he sighed in frustration, wanting to do more, but knowing he couldn't. Neither of them had mentioned sex to their main healer, but since she stressed that their bodies were not yet strong enough for physical intimacy after every examination, they got the idea.

"I respectfully disagree.

Chapter 33

Hermione walked into their hospital room with a smile on her face and a bounce in her step. Literally. Remus watched as she picked up a few books scattered around the room, bobbing on the heels of her feet the entire time. "What?"

She turned and grinned, her entire face lighting up with joy. "You are looking at a healed woman."

He pushed himself up to a sitting position. "Really?"

"I just got a clean bill of health. There's no internal damage and, as proved during the last full moon, the cuts have no negative side effects on my body. I'll always have scars, but I think scars are sexy, so ..."

He laughed when she jumped on the bed to give him an enthusiastic kiss. "Did she tell you when you get to go home?"

Hermione sat back. "That's the thing. I'm fine and could go home tomorrow, but you, my love, need to stay longer." She carded her fingers through his hair. "We agreed it would be better for you if I stayed with you."

"Meaning you told her you're staying until I get to leave."

She leaned forward to kiss him again. "Maybe," she murmured against his lips.

Tangling his hands in her hair, he made sure she couldn't move away. "Thank you."

She climbed on top of him so her legs were on either side of his waist, his hard length pressed against her center. She ran her hands under his T-shirt as she leaned down to nibble on his ear as she slowly rotated her hips. "If you really want to thank me ..." she whispered suggestively.

He groaned. "You're killing me, sweetheart. I haven't gotten a clean bill of health."

She pulled back slightly and eyed him with a wicked grin. "I guess that means you'll just have to lay there and take it then."

He moaned as she kissed him again, her tongue tracing the outline of his lips before diving in. She sighed as he slowly slid his hands down to grasp her hips, lifting his own as she pressed down. "Remember our first time?" she whispered, her forehead pressed against his as she stared into his eyes. "How you held me like this and showed me how to ride you until I came?"

Did she have to ask? He'd never forget what she looked like the first time he saw her come, the sounds she made as she reached that moment of pure bliss.

"I wanted you so much, Remus. I still do. I'll never stop."

He couldn't answer. Her scent, her words -- it was too much. He tightened his hold on her and moved faster, harder.

"We can do that, right? Please? I ache for you so much. I can't wait until I feel you slide inside me, your hard cock moving inside me, making me feel so good. I'm so wet, so ready ..."

"Hermione ... baby, please ..."

"Don't stop," she begged. She placed her hands over his and dragged them up to her breasts. He started kneading the soft skin. She leaned back on a sigh, still grinding her hips into his as his fingers plucked her nipples. "Oh God, I missed you. I missed this," she panted. "Don't stop. Don't stop, I'm almost there."

He was, too. It was ridiculous. He was a grown man and here he was, fully clothed, moving against Hermione like some horny teenager. Then again, he hadn't been this hard or this horny since he was a teenager. It had been so long, too long. She felt so good.

They stopped talking, their bodies moving together in a dance neither ever forgot. He watched her, her face flushed as she rode him, her eyes closed, mouth slightly open as her breathing picked up. Was there anything sexier than a woman taking her pleasure?

"Look at me," he demanded.

Heavy eyes lifted. She smiled slowly and leaned forward. She pressed her lips to his and moaned into his mouth as she came, her body going lax. Seconds later, he followed, sinking boneless into the hospital bed. He stroked her back, his hands slowly moving up and down the cotton of her T-shirt as they waited for the heart rates to return to normal.

"I should be mortified," he said, his voice muffled by her hair.

He could feel her lips turn up in a smile. "But you're not?"

"I feel too good at the moment."

She giggled, performed a quick cleaning spell, and snuggled closer. She felt amazing. She had no idea how much she needed that.

"Hey," Remus whispered after a minute. "You just did magic."

She pulled back a bit, eyes wide. "I did. I didn't even think about it."

He smiled. "Feel better?"

"Tons."

"Me, too."

An hour later, he was feeling even better, thanks to the flask of firewhiskey Sirius had snuck him; his contribution to Hermione's birthday gathering. Avoiding Hermione's watchful gaze - and Molly's -- Remus and Sirius drank a quick toast to their health in the corner of the room while Bill and George stood guard.

"I can't remember the last time I had to sneak a drink." Remus passed the flask to his friend.

"It seems like today is the day you recapture your youth." Sirius smirked as he took another pull.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Remus' eyes narrowed. "I know that look. That look doesn't mean 'nothing.' That look means something."

"I have no idea what you are talking about, Moony."

"Spill it."

Sirius barked out a laugh. Remus grabbed his friend by the arm marched him into the hallway. "What do you know?"

"I know nothing."

"Fine. What did you see?"

He winked. "A lot."

Remus groaned. He buried his face in his hands as his friend laughed. "How long were you there?"

"I caught the tail end of the performance. Very impressive, sir." Sirius held the flask up in a toast.

"Fuck," Remus groaned. "Please tell me you were the only one who saw us."

"I was the only one that saw you," Sirius repeated obediently.

He studied Sirius' face. "Now tell me that's the truth."

"It's the truth. I swear."

Remus calculated how much dirt he had on Sirius and what he was willing to let go of to maintain his silence.

"Unclench, Moony. I'm not going to say anything."

"I want to believe you, but I don't."

Sirius clapped one hand on Remus' shoulder and held up his other. "I solemnly swear that this story will remain in the vault. Forever. I'm giving you a free pass because of the whole taken-hostage-and-almost-dying thing."

Remus laughed. "Well, if that's all it takes ..." He accepted the flask and took one last sip. God, has firewhiskey always tasted this good? Handing it back to Sirius, he eyed his friend. He looked better. His screaming match with Hermione must have been what he needed. His eyes no longer had that haunted look. "Thanks for looking after her, Padfoot."

Sirius scoffed. "You mean the witch who took off in the middle of the night? The one who nearly got herself killed fighting a monster? Yeah, I did a great job."

"I never said it was going to be easy. This is Hermione we're talking about."

"That's true. She would have given Lily a run for her money, wouldn't she?"

Remus pictured the redhead and nodded. Yes, she would. Swallowing the lump in his throat he got every time he thought about James and Lily, he grabbed his friend in a tight hug, thumping him on the back a few times. He still had Sirius. Thank Merlin for that. "Really," he said, his voice husky. "I owe you. You know that, right?"

"I was hoping you would say that." He dug into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a small box. "I've been holding on to this for you. I even took it to Wizengamot for the vote, you know, just in case you did the dramatic entrance thing ..." he trailed off and shrugged, avoiding his friend's gaze.

"I'm OK, Padfoot," Remus said quietly. "Hermione's OK. I'm getting stronger. We're fine."

Sirius handed the box to Remus. "So go in there and make it better."

"You look happy."

Hermione looked at Ginny. "I am happy."

"No, not happy happy, but *happy* happy," she said suggestively.

Hermione blushed.

"I knew it!" she yelled triumphantly, not caring that nearly every adult in the room turned to stare at them. Hermione did, though. She took Ginny by one arm, Rebecca by the other, and dragged both into the bathroom. She closed the bathroom door and cast a silencing charm for good measure.

"You totally shagged Remus!"

Rebecca looked confused. "Why is that a big deal? They're a couple, right?"

"But they're in a hospital! I'm pretty sure shagging in a hospital is against the rules!" Laughing, Ginny pulled Hermione in for a hug. "I am so happy! The two biggest rule followers I know got down and dirty in a hospital. This is amazing!"

Hermione pulled away with a laugh. "We did not get 'down and dirty.'"

"Fine," Ginny rolled her eyes. "You made love."

"Oh, God!" Hermione laughed. "That sounds even worse! Never, ever say that to me again!"

"So, what happened?" Rebecca asked.

Hermione grinned at her friends. "Can I first say how happy I am to have another girl in our group?"

Ginny nodded. "Hear, hear!"

Rebecca blushed.

"To answer your question, Rebecca, Remus and I ... we *connected*."

Now Ginny looked confused. "What the hell does that mean?"

Hermione bit her lip. "It means that before everyone got here, I ... well, I kind of jumped him."

"This is a moment. We're having a moment." Ginny said to Rebecca. "She never tells stories. Keep going, Hermione."

"That's it, really. I had my final checkup and the healer said I can go home tomorrow. I told her I'm staying until Remus leaves, and when I told him that, he kissed me to say thank you -"

"He is so sweet," Rebecca interrupted.

" - and then I told him if he really wanted to thank me ..." she trailed off.

"No!" Ginny cried. "You can't stop now! Did you do a strip tease? Did you rip off his clothes?"

Hermione shook her head. "Don't laugh, but we didn't get naked at all."

"Huh?" Ginny asked.

"Um, I climbed on top of him and we ... we just kind of moved together until we both ..." she stopped talking and stared pointedly at her friends. Ginny stared back, her brows furrowed at she tried to figure out what she was saying. When she got it, she started giggling.

"That's perfect," she said. "I don't know why, but it is."

"Well, technically, Remus is still kind of weak, so sex isn't really something he's supposed to do, but ..."

"Judging by the grin on your face, I'm willing to bet he's not that weak," Rebecca told her before clasping her hand over her mouth. "Oh God, I can't believe I just said that. I'm so sorry!"

Hermione laughed. "Don't be sorry! It's totally true. I don't know ... Usually he's the dominant one in our relationship, werewolf and everything. It was kind of nice to be the one in control."

"Hear, hear!" Ginny yelled.

Hermione chose to ignore the smirks Fred and George sent her way when she exited the bathroom, walking over to Arthur and Molly Weasley instead. She wrapped her arms around the former for a hug.

"How's my girl?" Arthur asked, kissing the top of her head.

"I'm getting better every day."

Squeezing tight, he nodded, not trusting himself to say more. Hermione turned towards Molly, grinning as the woman studied her with a critical eye.

"You're still too thin."

"Molly," Arthur started.

"She is! Come now, Hermione. Sit here and I'll get you a plate."

Knowing it would be pointless to argue; she followed Molly to a pair of chairs and took a seat. Seconds later, a plate piled with food was in her lap. Knowing Molly would hover until she ate, Hermione picked up a sandwich and took a large bite.

"Good girl," Molly told her. "Now, here comes Remus. I'm going to get him a plate, too."

Hermione grinned at Remus as he sat next to her. He snatched a couple of strawberries off her plate and popping them in his mouth. "Fair warning - Molly is fixing you a plate, too."

"I'd expect nothing less." He smiled his thanks at Molly as she handed him his food.

"Both of you need to stop socializing and eat." She tried her best to look stern before her emotions got the best of her.

"Come on, Mum, no crying." Fred wrapped an arm around his mother.

"You don't want to bring the party down." George added.

"I know, I know," she sniffed. "It's just ... I'm so happy!"

Rolling their eyes, the twins led their mother away.

"How are you?" Remus asked Hermione.

"I was going to ask you the same thing," she replied. "Are you OK? Do you need to lay down?"

He shook his head and set his plate on the floor.

"You didn't finish your food," Hermione told him. "Molly's going to lecture you."

"I think she'll let it slide this time."

"Why?"

Remus reached into his pocket and took out a small black box. "Because of this."

Hermione watched, wide-eyed, as Remus dropped to one knee in front of her. He ignored the excited gasps from several people as he took her plate out of her lap and placed it on the floor. "I wanted to do this so many times," he started as he opened the box. "I bought this ring on your 17th birthday. I didn't even know then if I'd ever have the courage to give it to you. Instead, I carried it with me everywhere. It became a symbol; a reminder of why we were fighting Voldemort, of why I had to let you go with Harry and Ron even though it scared me to death. There were times I believed it would be just that - a symbol - because I couldn't convince myself that someone as wonderful and amazing as you would love someone like me."

He took her hand. "When you accepted me, all of me, and accepted our bond ... I wanted to propose to you then. I know there are people in this room that wanted me to, too," he grinned when he heard a few chuckles. "But I wanted our engagement to be public, to be celebrated; not something we had to hide because of some archaic law. I never wanted you to feel ashamed of what we had, so I waited."

He cleared his throat. He couldn't believe this moment was happening, that everything he ever wanted was right there, so close to finally, truly, being his. He picked up Hermione's left hand in his right and kissed the inside of her wrist. "My plan was to propose to you the moment the law was eradicated, but ..." he trailed off, trying to smile as a tear slid down Hermione's cheek. "I never thought I'd propose to you on a cold floor in a hospital, Hermione, but there were moments I was afraid I'd never get the chance to propose to you at all. You deserve so much more than this. You deserve a grand, romantic gesture, but I'm too selfish to wait any more."

"Hermione Granger, I love you more than anything. All that I am, all that I ever will be, is yours. Will you please marry me?"

She dropped to her knees, framed his face with her hands and kissed him, throwing herself into it, not caring who was watching, even when Ron and the twins started cheering.

"Yes," she said between kisses. "Yes, yes, yes!"

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Soul mates.

A beautiful phrase, but that's usually all it is: a phrase. It's a fairy tale parents tell their children, a story they repeat when their young hearts are broken for the first time.

"Somewhere," they say, "there is someone out there made for you; someone who completes you. When you find them, you'll know."

For werewolves, it isn't a tale.

"The concept of a mate, the one person in the entire world who is yours in every sense of the word, is not only part of our culture, it's universally acknowledged," said Remus Lupin, former Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry professor, Ministry of Magic employee and resident werewolf.

That doesn't mean the task of finding one's mate is easy. Most werewolves are solitary creatures. Their tendency to live alone and avoid people makes it difficult to find the person that completes them.

"Unfortunately, most werewolves live their entire lives without their mate," Lupin said. "They might have relationships, but they won't fall in love. That is an emotion reserved only for their mate."

Lupin knows what he is talking about. When he was 32, he found his mate. She was one of his students at Hogwarts: Hermione Granger.

"I was bitten when I was four, so by that time in my life, I was resigned to being alone," Lupin said. "I never expected to recognize my mate's scent on the Hogwarts Express."

But he did. When he realized it belonged to a 13-year-old student, though, Lupin said his first reaction was to panic; a reaction Granger said he still had after she was of age.

"I don't think I can stress enough how much Remus did NOT treat me as his intended during his time at Hogwarts and our interactions in all the years after," she said. "I was the one with the crush. He was the one who went out of his way to avoid me."

"You make me sound like I ran away every time I saw you," Remus groaned.

Sirius looked up from his copy of *The Daily Prophet*. "Interesting," he mused with a smirk. "I seem to recall a time when all of your missions with the Order would take place while Hermione was on a school break. That's odd. Isn't that odd, Harry?"

"Very odd, Sirius."

Hermione rolled her eyes and kept reading.

Lupin, now 40, blushed – "I did not!" Remus yelled – after Granger, 20, shared this tidbit with me during lunch Wednesday. The couple was recently discharged from St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries after nearly a month of care and rehabilitation.

Their hospital stay ends a dark chapter in their lives. Lupin, who works for the Ministry of Magic's Care of Magical Creatures division, left on a mission for Minister of Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt in February. Shacklebolt wanted Lupin to reach out to England's werewolf population to assist in his goal to eradicate anti-werewolf legislation. Granger, who was not allowed to accompany Lupin for fear that her status as his mate would put her in danger – "That makes it sound like I asked for your permission and you said no," Hermione grumbled – spent their time apart developing a way to mass-produce the Wolfsbane potion, which allows those infected with lycanthropy to maintain their sense of self during the full moon.

Granger also created a way for werewolves to receive the potion by annual injection, giving the population peace of mind for an entire year.

*"She's a brilliant witch," said Horace Slughorn, longtime Potions master at Hogwarts
"Anyone who has met Miss Granger is aware of her intelligence."*

"Of course he would agree to an interview," Hermione sniffed.

In April, though, Granger was stricken to learn that Lupin was missing, believed to have been taken hostage by Fenrir Greyback, the same werewolf who attacked Lupin when he was a child. Greyback was a supporter of You-Know-Who and was believed by the Ministry to be dead following the final battle at Hogwarts.

The Ministry was wrong.

"You can say that again," Hermione muttered.

Lupin had been traveling with William Weasley, another one of Greyback's victims. Weasley, however, was only scratched, not bitten. He isn't a werewolf and has no desire to attack and kill people during the full moon. When contacted for comment, Weasley informed this columnist to let him be, lest he felt the urge to test that theory.

"I love Bill," Hermione said.

Those redheads do have a temper, don't they?

"Has she met Molly?" Sirius asked.

The Auror Department launched a search for Lupin, with the Boy-Who-Live himself, Harry Potter, leading the charge. Potter, Granger's best friend and ex-boyfriend – "We were never a couple!" Hermione and Harry yelled – is the son of James and Lily Potter, who attended Hogwarts with Lupin. Potter also is the godson of Sirius Black, who is Lupin's best friend.

I could go on and on about Black's past, but we're all familiar with it, aren't we? Some of us a little more familiar than others, right ladies?

Remus snorted.

(Both Potter and Black refused repeated requests for interviews. Auror Ronald Weasley, who is best friends with Granger and Potter, provided a statement similar to that shared by his older brother.)

"I love Ron, too," Hermione said.

"You are being awfully free with your affections, sweetheart."

"Jealous?" she teased.

He growled softly and nipped her earlobe.

"I actually gave her a great quote," Sirius cried. "It's not my fault the old bat has no imagination."

"At least she hasn't written about my eyes being filled with the horrors of my life," Harry said.

"There's still another page, Harry," Remus informed him.

The auror's search was called off after all of the department's leads went cold. There had been no sign of Lupin, or Greyback, since April.

"It was a dark time in my life," Granger said. "I hold no ill will towards Harry, Ron or anyone else at the Ministry. They did what they could, with the resources that they had, and I am grateful for that."

"That is quite the politically-correct comment, love," Sirius said.

"I didn't mean a word of it – except for the part about Harry and Ron."

"Thank you, Hermione."

In the end, she said, it was up to her.

"I did NOT say that!"

"But it was true, wasn't it?" Harry asked.

"Well ... yes, but I wouldn't say that."

Harry refrained from commenting. Sirius rolled his eyes. Remus kissed Hermione on the cheek and kept reading.

Greyback didn't possess magic of his own, but somehow managed to obtain blood from both Lupin and Granger. He used their blood in a spell to hide his location. (I assume he took Lupin's blood while he had him in captivity. Granger refused to comment on how he could

have obtained hers. It's likely it happened during the war.) Granger came across this magic while researching her own rescue attempt, which involved yours truly.

Granger came to see me late one night in August with a proposition – write a column detailing her plans to find Greyback and rescue Lupin, and she will share their story with me and my lovely readers. I was more than willing to help her without that incentive, but I couldn't let my readers down. It turns out Greyback is a fan of my column. (I'm not surprised; my writing appeals to many.). Granger knew he would read of her mission and have so much anger that a Muggle-born witch would be so bold to go after him, that his anger would unveil his location.

"I could not have done it without you," Granger said. "Thank you."

"I must have missed that part of the interview," Remus teased Hermione.

"I never said that," she hissed.

Granger did not offer details on what happened after she caught up with Greyback; only that the two of them fought and she came out victorious. Hospital records, though, indicate that Granger received deep cuts on her back and abdomen, lost a significant amount of blood, and managed to drain not only all of her magic, but Lupin's, too.

*According to werewolf lore, once a wolf has consummated the relationship with his or her mate – "Ha! Your sex life made *The Daily Prophet*, Moony!" – the couple is bonded. This bond allowed Lupin to transfer his magic to Granger through his wand – "Is she still talking about sex?" Sirius asked – which he left with Weasley after Greyback's attack.*

"It was a brilliant move on his part," Granger gushed as she looked at Lupin with love in her eyes.

"She loves writing about what she sees in people's eyes," Harry said.

"In this case, it's true," Hermione replied, making both Harry and Sirius groan. She winked at Remus.

It is not known what spells Granger used on Greyback. All information regarding her rescue mission was sealed by the Ministry under Shacklebolt's orders.

"An investigation was conducted and Miss Granger was found to have dueled in self-defense," the Minister of Magic stated in a news release.

Greyback was arrested. He was transferred to Azkaban where he was found dead 12 days later. The official report says he died of natural causes. No one has requested an investigation. According to the Ministry, the matter is closed.

Lupin had been held hostage for more than three months. According to his hospital records – "Who the hell gave those to her?" Remus yelled – Lupin was admitted with several broken ribs, broken hand and moderate concussion. Abrasions covered 80 percent of his body, and he was severely malnourished and dehydrated.

Both Lupin and Granger were unconscious when they arrived at St. Mungo's. The couple remained unconscious for nearly a week, though hospital workers said the rest allowed both to heal. Both have since recovered all magical abilities. Lupin had to undergo physical therapy for several weeks to regain his physical strength.

"Not all of them, eh Moony?" Sirius laughed.

"What?" Hermione asked.

"Nothing," Remus replied quickly. He kicked Sirius leg under the table. The raven-haired wizard grinned in response.

The couple's stay at St. Mungo's wasn't all work. My sources tell me that during Granger's birthday celebration, which took place in the couple's hospital room, Lupin proposed to her in front of their friends. I admired the diamond on Granger's finger, who blushed – "Ha!" Remus shouted triumphantly when Hermione sniffed – and said the moment was better than anything she imagined.

"I was there when you said it, but I know it's a lie," Remus whispered in Hermione's ear. "I've been on the receiving end of the scenarios dreamed up by that amazing brain of yours."

Neither would divulge their wedding plans, but I've been told that the ceremony will take place this month. October is a lovely time for a wedding.

"Who blabbed that?" Hermione asked.

According to Lupin, he and Granger became married when he claimed her, which he said did not happen until she was well past the legal age for a physical relationship.

"Son of a bitch," Remus groaned. Sirius and Harry tried not to laugh, but they were unsuccessful. Hermione responded by making both of their chairs disappear, causing them to fall to the ground.

"Thank you for that," Remus told her.

"Anytime."

"Until Wizengamot voted in July to eradicate the anti-werewolf legislation, it was not legal for werewolves to marry a witch or wizard," Lupin said. "My work with the Ministry to change this way of thinking was personal on several accounts, but my ultimate desire was to see the laws changed so I could marry Hermione in a wizard ceremony."

Granger, who lost her parents during the war, said she will be walked down the aisle by Arthur Weasley.

"Mr. Weasley – the entire Weasley family – has cared for me since my first year at Hogwarts. I miss my parents greatly, but I'm very lucky to have an amazing surrogate family, with parents and siblings who love me and my fiancé, and want nothing more than for us to be happy. After all, isn't that what we all want, what we deserve, after so many years of fighting?"

(I couldn't have said it better myself, dear readers. Well, I probably could, but this isn't my story.)

The vote to repeal the anti-werewolf legislation was made while Lupin was still missing. Granger was present for the historic event, which passed with overwhelming majority, but did not make a comment. However, when she was informed that Lupin would receive the Order of Merlin, First Class, posthumously, the curly-haired witch refused the designation on his behalf.

"Remus Lupin is not dead," she was quoted as saying. "Until a body is found, you can take that honor and -"

She was dragged away by Black before she could finish her sentence. It has not been announced whether or not this designation will be extended now that Lupin is alive. When asked about it, Lupin said he is honored to be considered for something so prestigious, but that living in a world where werewolves have the same rights as men and women is the greatest reward he could receive.

"That, and Hermione," he said. "The day she said she loved me is, and will forever be, the best day of my life."

"Aww," Sirius and Harry cooed.

Hermione climbed in Remus' lap and kissed him, making Harry duck behind the paper in embarrassment. Sirius watched; a smile on his face the entire time.

There you have it, readers. Soul mates do exist. I hope you find yours.

- Rita Skeeter

Chapter End Notes

I'm not good at writing nasty Rita. Let's assume she was so touched by the couple, she had a heart. For one column, at least.

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Stag night!"

Sirius walked into the study wearing dark jeans, a crimson button-down shirt and black boots, his beloved leather jacket in his hands. Tossing it on the back of an armchair, he plopped on the couch next to Remus and Hermione. "Were you going over the rules for tonight, love?" he teased.

She rolled her eyes. They'd been napping. While they were well enough to leave St. Mungo's, they still tired easily, Remus especially. Afternoon naps were now part of their routine, though Remus played fast and loose with the term nap. He argued, rather well, that as long as they were lying down, they were resting. Hermione pointed out that shagging against the wall that time he couldn't wait until they reached their bedroom wasn't laying down. He picked her up, carried her to their bedroom and presented an excellent rebuttal to her argument.

Hermione opened her mouth to tell Sirius that Remus wasn't the one she was worried about when there was a crash in the kitchen, followed by several loud and excited voices.

"Ron and the twins are here." Remus eyes' were closed, a small smile on his lips.

"As are Ginny, Luna and, judging from the crash, Rebecca," Sirius grinned. "Finally, Hermione, someone who is worse with floo powder than you."

She smacked him in the shoulder, sitting up as everyone entered the room.

"Are you guys ready to -" George stopped talking he caught sight of Hermione.

"Please continue, George. What are your plans tonight?" Hermione asked sweetly.

He grinned and shook his head.

"Sirius is in charge tonight," Fred told her, his smile growing wider when Remus groaned. "We're just along for the ride."

"Harry!" Ron shouted. "Get your arse down here so we can go!"

Upstairs, a door slammed and heavy footsteps were heard on the stairs. "Kingsley just owled to say he'll meet us at -" Like George, Harry stopped talking when he saw the women.

Ginny grinned. "The Minister of Magic is going, too? You are either going to have a lot of fun or no fun whatsoever."

"Don't worry about us, baby sister," Fred said.

"What are you ladies doing tonight?" George asked.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Nothing as exciting as what you have planned, I'm sure. We have a few wedding things to take care of before Saturday."

Remus looked guilty. "You do? Do you need help? I'm sure we can -"

"No!" Sirius shouted. "You are not helping with anything. You bought the ring, you asked the question and we got our dress robes. The only thing you have left to do is celebrate your freedom with your mates." He drew himself to his full height. "Men who have women present, kiss them goodbye. Let's go!"

Ron gave Rebecca a quick kiss, as Harry did with Ginny. Remus, however, stood up, pulled Hermione close to him and feasted on her lips until the catcalls started.

"Have fun," she smirked.

"I'll try."

Watching the men traipse out the front door, Ginny held a finger up until she was sure they were gone. "Right then." She pulled two bottles of wine from her bag. "Rebecca, grab the glasses."

"To Remus!"

The men clinked their shot glasses and drank. Remus laughed at Harry's glassy expression. He really was like James. Prongs could never hold his liquor, either.

Kingsley poured the next round. "I want to propose a toast."

Everyone jubilantly held up their glasses. They were at their third bar of the night, a Muggle establishment in south London where Kingsley felt comfortable letting go of his title to drink with the men who fought next to him during the war.

"When I first learned about Remus and Hermione, I wanted to kill him – not because I didn't approve of the match, but because that meant one of the brightest witches of our time was off the market for good."

"Hear, hear!" Fred and George shouted.

"Unfortunately for the rest of us single men, the two of you are perfectly matched. Anyone who has seen you together, and I doubt there's anyone at this table who *hasn't* walked in on you one time or another –"

"Seriously, you guys need to stop shagging on every available surface," Ron grumbled.

Harry nudged Ron's shoulder. "I live with them. Surfaces aren't necessary."

"Really?" Fred sat forward.

"Tell us more," George said.

Remus shook his head. The alcohol in his system made it difficult to be embarrassed. The alcohol and the fact that he wasn't embarrassed. He was sleeping with the sexiest witch he knew. He was damn proud of that.

"As I was saying," Kingsley continued, "the two of you were made for each other. I wish you nothing but the best and a lifetime of happiness! To Remus!"

"To Remus!"

Sirius swallowed the alcohol with a grimace. This was pathetic. It was barely midnight. It was too soon to feel this drunk. Tonight was not the night to act their age.

"All right, men; what's next?" he asked, ignoring the voice in his head the cautioned him to slow down. It sounded suspiciously like Hermione.

"I, unfortunately, need to leave," Kingsley said, grinning at the groans that followed his announcement. "I'm touched, but if I know Sirius, I think its best I'm not around for the second half of the evening."

Sirius tried to look innocent. He failed. Kingsley clasped a hand on Remus' shoulder, wished him luck and left.

"So ... strip club?" Fred asked.

"We are *not* going to a strip club!" Hermione yelled loud enough to make the guys at the next table look over. Ginny sent them a wink.

"Why not?" Luna asked.

Hermione stared at the blond witch. "You want to go to a strip club, Luna?"

"Dancing is one of the purest forms of physical expression," Luna replied in her dreamy voice.

"Not the mention that they men are hot!" Ginny shouted gleefully as she finished her bright pink drink.

Hermione giggled and drained the rest of her appletini. She and her friends had planned on having a slumber party, something Hermione always wanted to do when she was younger but was difficult to pull off when your best friends were boys, but after a couple of bottles of wine, the idea of staying in seemed terrible. Instead, the girls' raided Hermione's closet (thank goodness for magical alteration spells) and appareted to London.

Rebecca chose the first bar, saying their ladies night specials were among the best in the city. Hermione had to agree, as the third round of drinks appeared as if by magic. She chose the green one.

"There are from the men at the bar." The waitress spoke in the patient voice she reserved for highly intoxicated customers.

"Oh, maybe we shouldn't drink them," Rebecca worried. "I mean, two of us are engaged."

Ginny snickered. "What? Having a drink a guy buys you is grounds for sex?"

The waitress rolled her eyes. "No."

"See? She agrees with me." Ginny gave the waitress a wide smile. "We didn't ask them to buy us drinks and we are not going to compromise ourselves as a thank you. And, if they try anything ..." She made a move as if to pull her wand from her purse, but stopped when Hermione grabbed her arm and shook her head.

The waitress picked up their empty glasses and left. "Have fun, ladies."

Sighing, Rebecca picked up a drink. "Fine, we'll finish these and then we're going somewhere else."

"Why?" Hermione asked.

"Because I don't think those guys are content to stay at the bar," she said.

"Strip club!" Ginny yelled.

They didn't go to a strip club. Instead, they walked two blocks to another bar. It was less loud, less bright and less, well, everything. Hermione hopped onto the tall bar stool, the hem of her red dress rising dangerously high on her thigh. She ordered four strawberry mojitos as Ginny and Rebecca debated the rest of the night's activities.

"Do you think Remus would be upset if you went to a strip club?" Ginny asked.

Hermione considered the question. She had no idea what he would say. The idea of her willingly walking into one was preposterous. "Honestly, I don't know if I'm comfortable watching men take off their clothes to music."

"What if there wasn't music?" Luna asked innocently.

Ginny snickered. Her face turned as red as her hair. This got Rebecca laughing, which set Hermione off. Soon Luna was laughing, too. This was this site that greeted Remus and company as they walked inside.

"Are you kidding me?" Ron walked to the bar. "I thought you weren't going out!"

Rebecca grinned. "Ron! Hi!"

"Hi." He eyed her cautiously. "How drunk are you?"

"Compared to your sister and Hermione, I am 100 percent sober."

"Oh God," he groaned.

"Hermione."

She turned in her chair. Her face lit up when she saw Remus. "Hi! Where'd you come from?"

His smile was indulgent. "I could ask you the same question."

"We got bored," she replied as if that solved everything. She leaned in to kiss Remus, but then sat back, a panicked look on her face.

"What?"

"We're not supposed to see each other. It's bad luck!"

"That's the day of the wedding, sweetheart; not stag night."

"It's not good luck," Sirius grumbled. His plans for the evening were falling apart. Hermione was wasted. So was Ginny. There's no way Remus and Harry would let them wander London unaccompanied for the rest of the night.

"What's wrong, Sirius?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah," Ginny chimed in. "Why so serious?"

Her question set the girls into another round of laughter.

"I know you're not happy mate, but this isn't the worst thing in the world," George threw an arm around Sirius' shoulder.

"Why's that?"

"Drunk Hermione is the best!" Fred cried. "Let's get a table and see how far things will go."

Hermione giggled as she stole a sip of Remus' drink. It didn't taste like anything. "Remus? Remus!" she shouted from her perch on his lap.

Remus ignored the twins' snickers. "Yes, sweetheart?"

"Something's wrong with your drink. I can't taste anything."

"Oh no!" Ginny cried. "What if you drank too much and your taste buds are gone?"

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "Is that possible? Remus, I don't have any taste buds!"

"Hermione, you have your taste buds." Sirius rolled his eyes. "You're drinking water."

She made a face. "Why?"

Remus brushed a few curls from Hermione's flushed face. "I thought maybe you should stop with the alcohol." She looked at him as if he was crazy. "Apparently that was a stupid idea."

"It was! This is your stag night! We need to do something!"

"We were doing something." Sirius muttered. "Then we ran into you lot."

Hermione looked heartbroken. "You're not having fun, are you?" She slid off Remus' lap, crawled over Fred and plopped onto Sirius'. Looping her arms around his neck, she leaned forward to whisper so Remus wouldn't hear. "What did you want to do tonight?"

Remus shook his head. She was still yelling. Sirius shrugged.

"Come on! Don't be a baby. What did you do for James' stag night?"

Harry looked interested.

"We went to a strip club," Sirius said.

"Tell them what happened at the strip club, Padfoot," Remus grinned.

Sirius sighed in resignation. "I accidentally gave Lily's engagement ring to one of the dancers."

Half of the table – the male side – laughed hysterically. The female side gasped. Well, not Luna. She was leaning against George, sound asleep. He had his arm around her to keep her from falling. Hermione made a mental note to ask about that later and promptly forgot it.

"What did you do?"

"We waited until the club closed and I got the ring back," Sirius mumbled. Hermione snickered. Then she checked her hand to make sure she was still wearing her engagement ring. "You're fine, love," Sirius told her.

"Good. I wanted to be sure before we go."

"Where are we going?" Ron muttered from his facedown position at the table.

"To a strip club."

"What?" Remus asked.

"Really?" Sirius perked up.

"Yay!" Ginny exclaimed.

"We're not going to a guy strip club, Ginny," Hermione explained. "We're going to a girl one. For the guys. For Remus. It's his stag night, after all."

Remus wondered how mad Sirius would be if he took Hermione home and put her to bed. "I don't want to go to a strip club."

"I don't care." She stubbornly crossed her arms over her chest. "We're not doing it for you; we're doing it for Sirius."

Yes she was drunk and there were times he had trouble following sober Hermione's train of thought, but Remus was utterly confused. "You just said we were doing this for me."

"Don't be selfish, Remus."

"But it's my stag night."

Hermione waved her hand dismissively, nearly tumbling off Sirius' lap in the process. "That's not the point."

"It kind of is."

Fred watched the back-and-forth with a dopey grin. He was having the best time and they had yet to step foot in a strip club.

Hermione leaned close to Sirius again. "You'll make sure he has fun when we get there, right?"

"Absolutely."

"OK." She got to her feet, wobbled for a second, then took a few tentative steps.

"Hermione, what are you doing?" Remus asked.

"I need to visit the ladies room. I'll be back ..." She stopped talking. "What was I saying?"

Remus got to his feet and took Hermione's hand. "I'm walking her to the loo. When I get back, I expect all of you to have a realistic plan in place."

"Rebecca, get out your phone and find a strip club!" Hermione cried.

"On it!"

Hermione clutched Remus' hand and followed him to the loo. She didn't mind following. It gave her time to admire how his shirt pulled across his shoulders. Most people wouldn't look at him and imagine how amazing he looked unclothed, but she knew. He was long and lean, with a strength to him no other man could match. She loved feeling his muscles clench when he was on top of her, moving inside her. "You are so sexy!" she yelled, not realizing how many people looked up and smiled. Remus swept Hermione into his arms to hurry her along.

"You are drunk, my love."

"I know! It's fun! We should do this more often! Do you want to do this more often?"

Remus shook his head, but he was smiling. At least she was a happy drunk. Luckily, the restroom was single stall. Not even hesitating, Remus walked inside, setting Hermione down gently.

She smiled at him, the innocent smile of someone who crossed the line from buzzed, past drunk to completely snackered. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

"No. I really love you. Like if you told me someone else was your mate, I'd be sad and cry and then plot their death."

Remus laughed. "I know you would, sweetheart. It's frightening. Now, we're in the loo. Why don't you go to the stall, do what you need to do, and we can leave."

Her eyes widened. "I can't go while you're in here!"

He nodded. "I'll wait in the hall, but I'm keeping the door unlocked just in case."

He pulled the door closed and leaned against the doorway in the dark hallway.

"Hey. Is that bird your girlfriend?"

Remus recognized the man as one of the people who overheard Hermione minutes before. "She's my fiancée."

He looked skeptical. "A little young for you, isn't she?"

Remus raised an eyebrow. "Your point would be?"

"No point; just an observation." He leaned against the opposite wall. "Are you sure you have what it takes to keep her happy for the next 50 years?"

Remus had a quick mental image of Hermione in their bed, curls spread over the pillow, her face flushed as she gripped his arms, begging him to move faster. He smirked. "Pretty sure."

"Why is that?" the man asked.

The door swung open. Remus stumbled, but caught himself, turning to face an angry Hermione. "Because he's fucking amazing in bed!" She grabbed Remus by the arm and pulled him in the bathroom, slamming the door closed. She locked it, pushed Remus against it and jumped in his arms, yanking his head down so she could devour his lips.

"Hermione -"

"Shut up," she demanded. "I want you right here, right now, hard and fast. Make me scream so everyone hears us."

"Hermione -"

"Now!" She took his bottom lip between her teeth and bit. Hard.

He felt Moony's control snap, taking his with it. Their lips crashed violently. He grasped the bottom of her dress and pulled it up. He brushed a hand over her red satin knickers. "Off," he commanded. "Take them off."

She slid down his body and did what he said, laughing when he took them from her and stuck them in his pocket.

"To the sink," he demanded, eyes dark with lust. She did what he said, gasping when he spun her around so she was against his chest. He wrapped an arm around her waist and tangled a hand through her hair, tugging until she was staring at their reflection in the mirror. "What do you see, Hermione?"

"I see you and me," she responded, her voice hitched in excitement.

He kissed the side of her neck, running his tongue along her tendons. "Wrong. I see the most beautiful, desirable and sexy woman in the world." His tongue traced the outline of her ear. "I see a woman who is about to be fucked. Hard."

She hissed as his arm left her waist to go under her dress. He groaned when he touched her. "You are so wet, baby." Her head fell back to his shoulder as his fingers explored her folds. He circled her clit, but didn't touch it. Not yet. "What do you want?"

She raised her arms to wrap them around his neck, twisting her head so she could kiss him, but he pulled back before their lips could touch. "No, I asked you a question. What do you want?"

Her eyes flashed. Her lips quirked up in a sly grin. "I already told you. I want you here. Now. Hard. Fast."

He hissed her, his fingers still driving her crazy while his other hand unbuttoned his jeans. "Look at us," he demanded. "Watch. I want you to see what you look like when I take you."

"Remus ..."

"Do it!" He kicked her feet apart. She raised to the tips of her toes and grasped the counter as he slid inside her. He set a brutal pace, his fingers never leaving her wet folds as he moved in and out. She watched, fascinated, as her skin turned flushed with desire. His face was dark, eyes hooded, as he moved. "I'm not going to last long." His fingers plucked at her tight bundle of nerves, smiling wickedly when she gasped. "Neither are you."

It was barely a minute before she screamed his name, reveling in his shout of release seconds later. She slumped against the counter, Remus warm at her back, his hands over hers. He kissed the nape of her neck and rested his forehead against her damp curls. "Love you," he whispered.

"I bet you say that to all the girls you shag in the bathroom."

He smacked her hip. "Cheeky witch."

He said the spell to get them clean, opening the door after he was sure they both were set to rights. The man was still there, eyes wide. Hermione took Remus' hand and sent the guy a dazzling smile, pulling him back to their table.

"What took you so long?" Harry demanded.

"Long line," Hermione said briskly. She was suddenly filled with energy. She picked up Remus' water and draining it in one swallow. "Did you find a place, Rebecca?"

"I did."

"Let's go!" Hermione tugged Remus outside.

"Are you serious about this?" he asked.

"Very much so ... except for the part when I go with you."

"Huh?"

She gave him a soft kiss. "You need to have a real stag night, Remus. Sirius needs to be the one to do this for you. It would make him happy."

"What are you going to do?"

"We're going to go to Rebecca's. If we sober up, we'll apparate home. If not, I'll stay at her place until morning."

"I'll miss you," he said.

She laughed and whispered in his ear, "That's what the bathroom sex was for."

Unfortunately, Hermione's whisper was still more on the shouting end of the spectrum. Remus glared at Sirius, Fred, and George, who were too busy smirking to be concerned. Harry and Ron looked embarrassed. Hermione paid no attention, taking Luna's hand from George, and joining Rebecca and Ginny on the sidewalk.

"Do you know where you're going?" Rebecca asked.

"Yep!" Fred shouted.

"Have fun!" Hermione yelled.

Ginny waved, too, but half-heartedly. "How come they get to have all the fun?" she grumbled as Rebecca hailed a cab. Hermione climbed into the passenger seat, catching Rebecca's eye as she, Ginny and Luna settled in the back.

"Because we're going to our own strip club." She gave the cab driver the address. She had to repeat it after Ginny's squeal of excitement drowned out her voice the first time.

Chapter End Notes

Only two chapters to go!

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hermione ran into Ginny's room. "I still have glitter in my hair! It's been two days! How is that even possible?"

Ginny snickered. "Ask Ramone."

"Who's Ramone?" Molly Weasley asked.

"No one," Hermione, Ginny and Rebecca answered quickly. The three of them exchanged goofy grins which Molly caught, but wisely chose not to comment on. After all, it was Hermione's wedding.

"All right, the boys are in family room, so Hermione needs to stay in here until the ceremony begins. Ginny, Rebecca, why don't you help her with her hair and makeup before your get dressed? Hermione, dearest, how are you? Do you need something to eat? You barely had any lunch."

Hermione shook her head. She was too excited to eat. In less than two hours, she would be Hermione Granger-Lupin. She wanted to jump up and down in excitement. Or nerves. She paused as her stomach took a dip. Yes, definitely nerves. She wondered how Remus was doing. She spent the night at the Burrow, so she hadn't seen him since yesterday.

"Why can't you sleep here, in our own bed?" Remus asked as Hermione packed an overnight bag.

"Because I want our wedding night to be special," she replied, though she was already regretting her decision to accept Molly's offer to spend the night in her old room. It seemed like a great idea at the time.

"I'll make it special." Remus' wicked smile was full of promise.

"I know you will, but ...," she sighed. There was a reason she was doing this, right? "We're only going to get married once, Remus. Don't you want to wake up tomorrow knowing that's the last time you'll wake up alone?"

"No," he grumbled.

"You're pouting again," she called from the bathroom.

"I don't sleep well when you're not with me."

She understood that. She didn't sleep well without him – not that she expected to sleep at all that night. Molly was a whirlwind of last-minute wedding preparations.

She took Remus' face in her hands and kissed him softly, rubbing her nose against his. "I'll see you at 2 p.m. tomorrow," she promised. "I'll be the one in the white gown."

He wrapped his arms around her waist and breathed in her scent. "I'll be the one in the black dress robes trying not to attack you."

She hoped Sirius was keeping him calm.

Remus watched his friend pace back and forth. He was going to wear a path in the carpet if he didn't stop soon. "Calm down, Padfoot."

"I am calm," Sirius replied in a slightly panicked voice. "I'm the poster boy of calm. Don't I look calm?"

Remus tilted his head. Sirius had been fine all morning; cheerful, talkative. The moment he finished getting ready, though, it was like a curtain had been drawn on his good mood. He was tense; pensive. "Shouldn't I be the one who's nervous?"

Sirius stopped. "Yeah. Why aren't you?"

Remus smiled. "Because it's Hermione."

Sirius sighed and sat next to Remus on the couch.

"What?" Remus asked.

"I've been thinking ... Maybe you two should find a place of your own."

Remus was not expecting that. "You don't want us to live with you anymore?"

"No! You know me; the more, the merrier, but she's going to be your wife," he said with a shrug. "You don't want your wife to share a house with your best friend and his godson."

"It's not a traditional arrangement, I'll give you that, but my best friend happens to be one of her favorite people and his godson is her best friend. I don't think we'll have a problem."

"What about kids?"

Remus grinned at the thought. Kids. His kids. Hermione's kids. *Their* kids. "What about them?"

"Aren't you going to want to start a family?"

The thought gave him pause. The image of Hermione pregnant, swollen with his child, is one he just started allowing himself to imagine. She would be an amazing mother. "Eventually," he said softly.

"So?"

"So you're saying we can't raise them at Grimmauld Place? You and Hermione cleared the house of all Dark Magic," Remus reminded his friend. "She still won't allow you to buy power tools and there's plenty of space to build a nursery or two."

Sirius smiled, his body relaxing for the first time since he put on his dress robes. "The two of you really do talk through everything."

"She's mine. I'm hers."

Sirius grinned. "Made for each other."

The knock on the door was cautious.

"Who is it?" Ginny called.

"It's us," Harry answered.

Ginny opened the door a crack and eyed Harry and Ron. "What can I do for you?"

"Can we come in, please?" Ron asked. "We want to talk to Hermione before the ceremony."

Opening the door wide, she watched their faces as they took in the sight of Hermione in her wedding dress. The design was simple – a strapless white taffeta with a tight bodice that flowed A-line style to the floor. Hermione chose to wear her hair loose, her curls flowing down her back. Her only jewelry was her engagement ring.

"You look amazing," Harry told her. Ron simply nodded.

Hermione grinned. "I feel amazing. How's Remus? Have you seen him? Is he nervous?"

"He's completely relaxed. Everyone else is running around like crazy and he's watching it all with an amused expression," Ron told her.

She smiled. That was her Remus; the calm in the storm.

"I saw him eating a chocolate bar," he added.

That was her Remus.

"We ... we kind of wanted to hang out before we had to go outside, if that's all right," Harry said.

Hermione grinned. She knew what he was trying to say. Everything was going to change. Yes, she and Remus had been a couple for more than a year, but there's a difference between

being together, and being husband and wife. Ginny and Rebecca left the room, giving the three friends their privacy.

"We'll be back to kick you out in a little bit," Ginny promised.

The trio jumped on the bed. Hermione's dress didn't allow her to sit the way she usually did, on her back, legs against the headboard, so Harry sat that way while she leaned against the headboard, her legs straight out. Ron, as usual, flopped on the foot of the bed.

"Does this position make you smarter?" Harry asked. "I always wondered that."

Hermione blushed. "I read somewhere once that stretching your legs would help with growth spurts; you know, ease the muscle aches."

"But you're short." Ron winked at the girl he once thought he'd marry. The idea seemed ludicrous now. He couldn't imagine Hermione with anyone other than Remus.

"Obviously I never had a growth spurt great enough where my muscles ached," she sighed.

"I can't believe you're getting married," Ron said.

"You'll be next," she reminded him.

He paled slightly. "I know. I'm terrified. I'm excited, but terrified. Does that make sense?"

"Absolutely." Harry took Hermione's hand in his. "So ... we're still going to hang out and stuff, right?"

Hermione smiled. He was such a worrier and he hated change. He was so much like Sirius at times. "Harry, we live in the same house."

"I know, but you'll be *married*."

"Married; not dead. And married to Remus, whom you love."

"He's pretty cool," Ron agreed. "Scary as hell when he's mad, but pretty cool. He'll be good for you. You'll be good for him."

"Just ... just try to have less sex around the house, OK?" Harry asked. "You'll be married now. Have some dignity."

Hermione pushed his feet off the headboard, laughing when he fell to the floor.

Remus and Sirius looked up at the loud thump. Arthur stood up with a smile.

"That, gentlemen, is my cue."

"Places, everyone!" Molly was practically pushing people out of the house. She stopped rushing when she felt a hand on her arm. "Remus?"

"May I escort you to your seat?" he asked.

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

The backyard was beautiful, the trees of the orchard setting the perfect backdrop of reds, yellows and oranges. A clear path of green grass led served as the aisle, with white chairs on either side holding the friends Remus and Hermione loved like family. Remus led Molly to the mother-of-the-bride seat, grinning when she kissed his cheek. He took his place in front of the alter, to the right of Kingsley, who agreed to be the ceremony's Ministry representative official, and waited for Hermione to appear.

"Ready?" Arthur asked holding out an arm.

Hermione thought she'd be nervous. She waited all day for a wave of panic to crash over her, but it never did. She was excited. She was anxious. She *really* wanted to see Remus, to take his hand in hers and look into his deep brown eyes, but she wasn't nervous. This was Remus. *Remus*. He was hers and she was his. Life may be full of uncertainties, but she'd never be uncertain about her love for him.

She linked her arm through Arthur's. "Ready. Thank you for giving me away."

"I hate having to let you go," he admitted as tears welled up in his eyes.

She kissed his cheek. "I'll always be your girl."

He smiled and pat her hand as they made their way downstairs. She would always be part of their family. And he'd have another son. And, someday - hopefully soon - grandchildren. He squeezed her hand when they approached the door that led to the yard. She smiled at him, took a deep breath, and waited for it to open.

His breath caught when he saw her. She was ... He didn't have the words. She looked radiant. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. She caught his eye as soon as she stepped outside, ignoring everyone else as she slowly made her way to him, a small smile on her lips.

"Who approves this union?" Kingsley's commanding voice echoing throughout the yard.

Arthur cleared his throat. "Her mother and I."

Kingsley nodded his assent. Arthur kissed Hermione on the cheek, shook Remus' hand and hurried to his seat. With Molly's hand secure in his, he watched as Kingsley performed the bonding ceremony, the magical tie that connected two people together for eternity. Remus'

voice was clear and strong as he promised to love and cherish Hermione. Hermione's own voice was steady as she made the same vow. Neither of their hands trembled as they placed their wedding bands on each other's fingers; though there was a chuckle when Remus leaned in to kiss Hermione after his ring was on her hand.

"Moony! He didn't get to that part yet!" Sirius laughed.

Staring into Hermione's eyes, Remus couldn't keep the grin off of his face.

"I now pronounce you man and wife," Kingsley announced. "Now, Remus, you may kiss your bride."

He moved forward, his lips a whisper from hers when he stopped. "I love you."

She laced her fingers behind his head. "I love you, too. Kiss me, Mr. Lupin."

"Anything you want, Mrs. Granger-Lupin."

Chapter End Notes

I'm not great at writing romance. Here's hoping the wedding wasn't too cheesy.

Last chapter coming soon! Thanks for reading!

Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Last chapter!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

18 months later

Remus walked into the kitchen, a quizzical, yet thoughtful look on his face. He nodded to Sirius, who was working his way through a stack of chocolate chip pancakes. The fact that he sat at the table with tea, not pancakes, made Sirius frown.

"Hermione made these."

Remus nodded.

"She left some for you."

"That's fine," he said distractedly.

"She's going to spend the day searching for nargles with Luna and we're on our own for supper."

"Alright."

Sirius balled up his napkin and threw it at Remus' face.

"What the -- what was that for?"

"Cause it's fun." Sirius pushed his plate away and studied his friend. Marriage has been good for him. His eyes had lost their wariness; his face was no longer strained. Even his monthly transformations seemed to go smoother with Hermione by Moony's side. Of course, the treatment she gave him afterwards – a warm bath, a hot meal and a long massage – could have something to do with that, too. "What's wrong?"

Remus sighed. "Nothing. I think."

"That's not vague at all."

"Sorry, Padfoot."

"Don't be sorry; talk to me."

Remus sipped his tea. "I don't know. Something seems ... off."

"Off?"

He shrugged, not knowing how else to describe the feeling that had plagued him since he opened his eyes that morning. "There's a new scent in the house. I can't place it."

Sirius sat up. His sense of smell wasn't as keen as Remus', but he wasn't a total slouch, either. He sniffed carefully. Chocolate. Mint. The lemon cleaner Hermione preferred. Completely normal. "I don't smell anything."

"That's what's bothering me. It comes and goes."

"Where'd you first notice it?"

"The bedroom."

"Maybe Hermione changed shampoos. Soap. Perfume. Laundry detergent. Candles."

Remus rolled his eyes. "You can name every item in the house, Padfoot; it's not something like that. It's deeper."

He was bored with the conversation. He wondered if Remus would mind if he helped himself to his pancakes warming on the stove. "Ask Hermione."

"I don't want her to worry."

Now it was Sirius' turn to roll his eyes. Hermione wasn't a worrier. Remus was the worrier in their relationship. She was a planner, a doer. If something was wrong, she fixed it. If you pissed her off, she fixed you. She was the person you wanted in your corner and the one you did not want to anger.

Not that he didn't enjoy getting her riled up. That's what friends do.

He decided he could live without the pancakes and sent his dishes to the sink with the wave of his wand. "Well, while you sit here and play detective, I'm off. See you later?"

Remus nodded, still looking pensive. Shaking his head, Sirius headed upstairs to get dressed and, out of curiosity only; he wasn't *worried*, took the extra flight of stairs to peek into Remus and Hermione's bedroom. He poked his head inside, took a deep breath and snorted.

It smelled like sex.

"Randy newlyweds," he smirked.

Hermione sighed, the swaying of the hammock nearly putting her to sleep. It was ridiculous, really. It was barely 10 a.m. and she was exhausted. She supposed it made sense. Remus insisted they celebrate their 18 month wedding anniversary the same way they celebrated

their wedding night. The fact that he made her do that for monthly anniversaries one through 17 ... no wonder she was tired.

Luckily, it was Friday. She only worked at the Ministry on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and popped into Fred and George's store on Mondays and Wednesdays. She was pleased Remus still wanted to work in the Ministry's Care and Regulation of Magical Creatures Division, and was willing to help her husband whenever she could, but she also liked the challenge working with the twins gave her. Plus, testing some of their inventions on Sirius kept life interesting.

"Napping?"

Hermione opened her eyes and smiled at her husband. "Have I thanked you for this?"

He helped her up so he could lay down on the hammock with her on top of him. "Only a million times since last Christmas."

She snuggled closer. "It's the perfect present."

"Despite the sex swing jokes?" Remus chuckled, remembering the horrified look on Molly's face.

"I hate Fred and George."

"Liar."

She didn't reply. He didn't expect her to. He knew he should go, at least put in an appearance at work, but this felt so right. It was a beautiful spring morning. There'd be rain later; he could smell it, but for now ... He paused and sniffed again. There it was. That smell. He opened his eyes and looked around. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The flowers that had blossomed were scents he was familiar with. No, it wasn't coming from outdoors. Hermione sighed in her sleep. The scent hit him hard.

It was her. It was coming from her.

Remus' eyes grew wide.

"She's *what*?"

"Pregnant."

Sirius sat on the sofa. He stared at Remus. He had a goofy smile on his face and his eyes were dazed. He sniffed to make sure he wasn't drunk, but there wasn't a drop of liquor on the man's breath. "Did she tell you?"

He shook his head. "She doesn't know."

"Wait; how is that possible? Women always know first."

"Not when their husband is a werewolf. I could smell it. Or him. Her."

Sirius sat back, amazed. He thought he knew everything there was to know about Moony, but apparently the old werewolf still had some tricks up his sleeve. "I didn't even know you were trying."

"This wasn't deliberate. I mean, it wasn't a mistake, but we didn't plan it, either. Hermione's exact words were 'If it's meant to be, it will be.'"

"When did she say that?"

"Last night."

"And you knocked her up already? Well done!"

Remus rolled his eyes, but he did feel oddly proud of himself. His Hermione, his wife, his *mate*, was pregnant. A baby. Was it a boy? A girl? Secretly, he wished for a boy. It wasn't that he wouldn't adore a daughter, but if she was born with her mother's looks, he'd have to spend the rest of his years fighting off admirers. He might need to lean on Harry a bit for that. An auror was sure to chase away potential suitors.

He sat on the couch next to Sirius. His heart felt full. He had everything he ever wanted, everything he ever dreamed of: the woman who completed him and, now, a child.

"Are you going to tell her?"

Remus looked over. "I ... I'm not sure. Would you want to know?"

"If I was having your baby?" Sirius laughed. "I think I'd want to know a lot of things first."

Remus snorted, bumping his shoulder into his friend's.

"Honestly, though ... I wouldn't."

"Why not?"

"Isn't this a woman thing? They say the spell, go to the healer and then they make the announcement. Do you really want to take that from her?"

Remus sighed. "No, but ..." Sirius was right. He knew that, but how much time would pass before Hermione realized she might be pregnant? This was the first day of her pregnancy. Would it be another week, maybe a month, before she realized something was different? Would he be able to keep quiet that entire time? She knew when he was keeping something from her. The bond that tied them together made keeping secrets damn near impossible.

She complained about it all the time.

"I'll help," Sirius announced.

Remus closed his eyes. "Nothing good ever came from you saying that."

"No, really. She's looking tired from Moony junior. I'll plant the idea in her head to see a healer. She'll come back, give you the news, you'll be happy and we can start planning the nursery."

Remus nodded thoughtfully. It wasn't the worst plan Sirius ever had. He absently rubbed the tattoo he got on his 41st birthday, Hermione's initials' made to resemble a cloud floating in front of the full moon. She loved it. She loved lying on his chest and tracing it with her fingers. Yes, Sirius' ideas were getting better with time.

"All right, let's give it a go."

"Are you all right, love? You look a bit peaked."

Hermione looked up. They were having dinner at the Burrow. She thought she was hiding her tiredness well, but apparently Sirius could tell she was lacking energy. It was odd that Remus didn't comment. Of course, the last time he told her she looked tired, she may have hexed him – *a light hex* – and banished him to the library until she calmed down.

The full moon still made her a bit anxious.

Molly Weasley studied Hermione. She did look pale. She circled the large table and pressed the back of her palm against Hermione's forehead. "You're not warm, but maybe you should see a healer ... just in case."

Hermione shuddered. She hated healers. The five weeks she and Remus spent at St. Mungo's were enough to last her a lifetime.

"There's a nasty flu going around," Arthur chimed in. He sent a subtle wink in Sirius' direction.

Luna looked up from her dessert. "I have a home remedy that could help," she started.

"Oh!" Molly smiled at the petite witch indulgently. She never would have imagined her George and Luna would make such an enchanting couple, but they did. In fact, their wedding was next month. Now, if only she could get Fred to settle down. "Luna, sweetheart, that's so nice, but Hermione should probably see a healer this time, at least to get a tonic." She turned to Hermione, her face firm. "Promise me."

Hermione looked at Remus for help, but he was smiling at Molly. "That's a good idea. We'll make an appointment first thing tomorrow."

"Suck up," she muttered quietly.

"In-laws," he whispered back.

"You do not have the flu, Mrs. Granger-Lupin."

Hermione sat up. The sudden movement made the room spin, just a bit. Something was off with her; she'd admit that. "Is it something else? I was hit with the crucio curse a few years ago. Are there long-term effects?"

The healer smiled. "Nothing that dire," she said. "You're pregnant."

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "I'm what?"

"Pregnant. Nearly a week along, according to the diagnostics, but the baby will be born in less than nine months. I'm not quite sure why ..." the healer looked down at her chart in confusion.

"My husband is a werewolf," Hermione murmured.

"Oh! Well, that explains it. You'll be welcoming your bundle of joy in –"

"Seven months."

"Correct. I'll want to see you again in a month, but for now I'll gather some information for you to take home and review. We'll be able to do a spell at the next appointment to determine the baby's gender, if you and your husband wish to know it."

Hermione nodded, but she wasn't really listening. A baby. Remus' baby. A little girl. Or maybe a boy. Either one, really, as long as they had their father's sandy hair and warm brown eyes. She wanted to cry. She wanted to laugh. She wanted Remus. He should be here. She needed to tell him. Now.

"Mrs. Granger-Lupin?"

She shook herself out of her thoughts. "Sorry! I'm sorry, I just ..."

The healer smiled. She was used to it. "Do you have any questions?"

"Is he, or she, OK?"

"Everything looks fine. Baby is perfect. Mum is perfect."

Hermione smiled. Mum.

"Can pregnant women floo?"

Sirius looked up from the chessboard. He tried to remember how Lily traveled when she was pregnant. Or Fleur. Or Ginny. Wait, Ginny. She was pregnant. She used the floo all the time. "Yes," he replied. "It's perfectly safe."

They heard something break in the kitchen.

"Or, you know, it's safe for any woman who isn't Hermione."

Remus jumped up to check on his wife, but Sirius gestured for him to sit down. Hermione's less-than-graceful floo exits were common. If Remus went rushing into the kitchen, she'd know he knew something.

Remus studied the chessboard – it was a complete scam, neither one of them was really playing – and waited for Hermione to enter the study. His heart was pounding.

"Hello!?"

"In here!" he called, avoiding Sirius' eyes.

Hermione stopped in the hall for a second. She loved Sirius, she did, but she didn't want him to be there for this announcement. She needed to tell Remus first, just the two of them, and then they'd tell Sirius. Together. He'd probably start talking about nursery plans. And ask for a power saw. She shook her head, knowing the argument she'd be having later that night. She walked into the study and smiled at her husband frowning at the chessboard. "Hi my love."

"Hey," Sirius answered.

Chuckling, she wrapped an arm around Remus' shoulders and kissed his cheek. "Hello my other love."

He leaned back, his eyes studying hers. "How was the healer? Are you OK?"

"Fine and yes."

He nodded and turned back to the game. He didn't trust himself to keep looking at her and not give anything away.

"Um ... " She perched on the arm of his chair and watched as the two men continued to play. Sirius chuckled when Remus lost another piece. "Can you come upstairs, Remus? Please?"

"Now?" Sirius asked. "We'll be finished in a bit."

Hermione sighed. She didn't want her husband to panic, but she couldn't wait, either. Smiling, she leaned forward and whispered in Remus' ear. "Please? I really *need* you."

Feeling confident he'd follow, she stood up and left the study. Remus watched her walk away, and then turned to Sirius.

"Go," he said with an exasperated sigh. "Get great news. Have sex. Don't think about me."

"Believe me," Remus said, pushing back his chair. "I won't."

He took the stairs two at a time, reaching their bedroom shortly after Hermione. She turned to him with a smile as he walked in, only slightly out of breath. He didn't stop until he was in front of her. He pulled her to him and kissed her, their tongues meeting in a dance they've perfected. He ran his hands down her back, settling them on her hips as maneuvered her to their bed.

"Remus?"

"Hmm?"

"I need to tell you something."

He lifted his head. For a second, he had forgotten her news. Their news. That's what happened whenever he touched her. He perched on the end of the bed and pulled her in his lap, cradling her close. "Are you sure everything is OK?"

She nodded. Her eyes were glittering with excitement. "Remember our conversation the other night, about not saying the contraceptive spell, and that if we are meant to have a baby, we'll have a baby."

He nodded.

She took a deep breath. "We're having a baby!"

He didn't have to fake his excitement. Hearing the words come out of Hermione's mouth – they made everything he knew real. She was pregnant. They were going to have a baby. "I know."

She jumped up from his lap. "You what?!"

Fuck. He played dumb. "What?"

She glared at him. "You just said you knew!"

He shook his head, frantic. "No, I didn't. You're pregnant?!? I can't believe this!"

He tried to hug her, but she put a hand out, stopping him in his tracks. "Remus John Lupin, I am only going to ask this once. Did you know I was pregnant?"

He sighed. He wasn't going to lie. He couldn't. "Yes."

"Since when?"

"Um ... the first day," he mumbled.

Her eyes grew wide. "You knew *then*?"

He felt horrible. "Sweetheart, I'm so sorry, but I could smell him. Or her. I woke up and something was different. There was a new scent in the house and it took me awhile to figure out it was our child growing inside you."

She stared at him. He knew before she did. He'd known they were going to be parents for nearly two weeks.

"I'm sorry. I am so, so sorry. I wanted to tell you, or have you tell me. Sweetheart ... Hermione, please don't be mad. You can tell everyone else. I won't say a word." He took her hands in his. "Baby, please. This is the greatest news you could ever give me. Please be happy."

She looked at him. He looked panicked, like he was afraid something that was out of his control would ruin the moment. God, she loved this man. "I am happy," she told him squeezing his hands. "Oh, Remus, I'm thrilled! We're going to have a baby! I just wish you would have told me so you could have gone to the healer, too. I wanted you to get the news when I did! Or, you know, *pretend* to get the news when I did!"

"Next time," he promised.

She stopped at that. Next time? She looked at her husband, her mate, and laughed. Why not? She launched herself at him, giggling as he fell back on the bed. She pressed kisses all over his face.

"Hermione, be careful! The baby!"

She ran her hands down his anxious face. "Is this what I have to look forward to for the next seven months?"

He was being ridiculous. He knew it, but didn't care. "Probably." He rolled so she was on her back. He propped himself up on his elbow and smiled at his wife. He brushed her hair away from her face and slid his hand down to rest lightly on her still-flat stomach. "We're having a baby. A little you."

"Or a little you."

He ducked his head so she wouldn't see the tears in her eyes. He breathed in the scent of the life they made together. "I love you so much, little one. I can't wait to meet you." He glanced up at the woman who watched him. She'd never know how precious she was to him. He was grateful he had the rest of their lives to try and show her. "I love you, Hermione. Thank you for being mine."

She rested her hand on top of his, over the new life they created. "Always."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

If you liked this story, I have two companion one-shots that go with it. They'll go up sometime this weekend!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!